TOKYOPOP
WELCOME TO THE
NHK
™
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Welcome to the N.H.K.

Welcome to the N.H.K.

volume 1

Tatsuhiko TAKIMOTO

POP FICTION

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Preface

In this world, conspiracies exist.

However, there is a more than a ninety-nine percent chance that the plausible-sounding conspiracies that you hear about from others are simple delusions or even intentional lies. When you visit a bookstore, the books with titles like *The Great Jewish Conspiracy to Ruin the Japanese Economy!* or *The Super Conspiracy of the CIA That Hides Their Secret Pact with Aliens!* are all just trivial delusions.

Even so… people love conspiracies.

Conspiracies. We are hopelessly fascinated by the sound of that word and its bittersweet echo.

Consider, for example, the process by which *The Jewish Conspiracy* theory comes to be: The author has multiple, terrible complexes and feelings, such as, "Why am I poor?"; "Why is my life not more comfortable?"; "Why can I not find a girlfriend?" His mind and body constantly are pressured, from both within and without.

Those pent-up grudges become endless feelings of hatred toward

society. They become rage.

However, the largest source of rage is his own personal cowardice.

He is poor because he lacks the skill with which to earn money. He has no girlfriend because he lacks charisma. But the process of seeing this truth and acknowledging his own incompetence requires quite a bit of courage. No human beings, regardless of who they might be, want to look directly at their own shortcomings.

At this point, the conspiracy theorist projects his cowardice onto the outside world.

He creates a fictitious "enemy" outside of himself.

Enemy. My enemy. Society's enemy.

"Because an enemy conspires to do evil, I cannot find happiness. Because of this conspiracy, I cannot find a girlfriend. That's right! This is all because of the Jews. Because the Jews are scheming away out there, I can't find happiness. Damn you, Jews! I won't forgive you!"

Truthfully, this kind of thinking also inconveniences Jewish people.

All conspiracy theorists need to look a little more closely at reality.

"Enemies" don't exist externally. "Evil" does not exist externally. One has to assume blame oneself for being a worthless person.

It's definitely not a Jewish conspiracy, nor a CIA conspiracy, and—obvious as this may be—it's not an alien conspiracy. Before all else, one needs to keep this fact firmly in mind while living one's life.

Even so…

A tiny percentage of people actually have stumbled upon a real conspiracy. There is, in fact, one person who witnessed with his own eyes a conspiracy that exists, at this very moment, in the most extreme secrecy.

Who is this person?

It's me.

Chapter 01

Birth of a Soldier

Part One

On a cold, cold January night, I learned about the existence of a conspiracy.

In my tiny six-mat[1], one-room apartment, I had ensconced myself next to my *kotatsu* stove.[2] It was a painfully dreary night.

Despite it being a new millennium, there was no hope in sight. I even cried while eating my New Year's soup.[3]

For an unemployed, twenty-two-year-old, male college dropout, the winter chill was piercing. In the middle of my filthy room, where thrown-off clothing littered the floor and the smell of cigarette smoke had soaked into the walls, I sighed over and over.

How could things have come to this?

It was all I could think about.

"Ah," I moaned.

If I didn't break out of my present condition soon, I would fall behind completely and disappear from normal society. Even worse, I was a college dropout already. I needed to find work fast and return to society.

I just… couldn't do it.

Why? What was the reason?

The answer is simple: Because I am a *hikikomori*.[4]

Currently, the hottest, most popular new social phenomenon—hikikomori. That's me. A recluse.

They say that there are now approximately two million hikikomori living in Japan. Two million is a tremendous number. If someone threw a rock on the street, they would hit a hikikomori… Of course, that wouldn't really happen. Hikikomori don't go outside, after all.

Anyway, I was one of the hikikomori currently so popular here in Japan. Not to mention that I was somewhat of a veteran hikikomori. I left my apartment only once a week, and then I'd just to go to a convenience store for food and cigarettes. My friends numbered zero, and I slept sixteen hours a day.

This year would mark four full years of living as a hikikomori. My lifestyle had caused me to drop out of college.

Seriously, I was such a frightful hikikomori that I should have been approaching professional status. No matter whom I might be up against, I really doubted I'd lose easily to other hikikomori.

In fact, I was confident that if an "International Hikikomori Olympics" were to take place, I would score pretty well. I was certain I would beat out other hikikomori regardless of country, whether it was a

Russian hikikomori who escaped through vodka, an English hikikomori whose escape was through drugs, or an American hikikomori who found escape by randomly shooting guns indoors.

Right! The famous founder of *kyokushin karate*,[5] Mr. Masutatsu Ohyama, also known as the "Godhand," supposedly holed up in the mountains during his youth in order to hone his spirit before going on to become the world's strongest karate master. If you think about it from that standpoint, then I—who have been holed up continuously in this apartment for a number of years—must be, at this very moment, incredibly close to becoming the strongest man in the world.

Well, it was worth a try. I decided to set up a beer bottle and try to break it with a chop of the hand.

"Hiii-ya!"

While wrapping my bloodied right hand in a bandage, I sat back down at the kotatsu.

Any way you looked at it, my mind hadn't been working properly of late. Could it be because I get sixteen hours of sleep per day? Or was it because I'd avoided contact with other people for more than half a year?

All day long, my brain remained in a fog. Even when I walked to the bathroom, my gait was unsteady.

But I didn't care about all that.

The more immediate problem was how to break out of this helpless hikikomori lifestyle.

Yes! I have to escape this festering hikikomori life as fast as possible. A

return to human society! A rebound from dropping out! I'll work, find a girlfriend, and lead a normal life!

If I continue this way, I will become a trauma victim. If I continue like this, I will be disqualified as a human being. I need a resolution right now!

Resolutions, however—such as "Today is the day I go outside and make myself find a part-time job!"—just faded away like mist, in fewer than ten minutes.

Why? Why is this?

Probably my ridiculously long life as a hikikomori had rotted away the very roots of my spirit.

I can't go on like tins. I must do something quickly.

At that point, I decided that in order to force my thoroughly weakened spirit to recover, I would try taking some of the White Drug I ordered online.

Even though it's called White Drug, it's not a major stimulant or anything. It's a perfectly legal, relatively powerful hallucinogen. However, although legal, it's said to have nearly the same effect as LSD. It acts directly on the serotonin receptors in the brain and reputedly causes unbelievably intense visions.

Exactly. To escape my gloomy situation, I had no choice but to rely on pharmaceutical power. I'd been pushed to the extreme of trying to stimulate my own worn-out brain with violently strong hallucinogens.

It's just as the famous Tatsuhiko Shibusawa[6] said: "The enlightenment you receive through religious training and the enlightenment you receive from drugs are, in the end, one and the same." Or something like that.

If that's the case, then let me be enlightened through drugs.

I will gain enlightenment and escape my hikikomori self I will shatter my feeble spirit and replace it with a strong sturdy courage. I will place just a small amount of the White Drug on top of my kotatsu and, in one breath, I will snort it up my nose!

Part Two

Oh, how wonderful, how pleasant!

In my tiny, grimy, six-mat, one-room apartment, with a kitchen sink filled with dirty dishes and a floor littered with cast-off clothing, I actually experienced a trip!

The walls wobble and squirm while the air conditioner breathes deeply. Mr. Stereo Speaker is talking.

Oh! Everything is alive. We are all one world.

Mr. Refrigerator, good evening.

Mr. Kotatsu, thank you for warming me.

Mr. Bed, you're the most comfortable bed ever.

Mr. TV, Mr. Computer, and everyone else I've met up to this point, thank you all.

"Mr. Satou, break out of your hikikomori life soon!"

Oh, everyone, you're all supporting me? Thank you, thank you. Nothing could make me happier. Now, I'll be fine. With everyone's warm support, I can escape from my life as a hikikomori.

Please watch. Look, right now, I am about to go outside. It's three o'clock in the morning, but that does not concern me. I'm about to escape from this room

into the vast world.

However, because it's cold, I must dress properly. Here we go. Put on my clothes, hat, and jacket. There, all ready.

Okay, I'm going outside. Time for me to say goodbye to all that hikikomori stuff. See you.

Goodbye.

For some reason, the door to my apartment didn't open. Why? Why wouldn't the door open?

Anxiety consumed me. Someone was trying to interfere with my escape.

"That's right. Mr. Satou, if you leave, you won't be a hikikomori any longer," my speakers informed me.

So?

"Someone is getting in your way."

The complete shock I received from that one phrase, transmitted by my speakers, was absolutely indescribable.

Interference.

Now that they mentioned it, I was reminded of the time when I first started my life as a hikikomori.

It had been a painfully hot summer day.

I stomped along, trudging up the slope to my school. Sweat dripped constantly and uncomfortably down the nape of my neck.

There were very few people on the road—maybe a couple of housewives heading home from shopping and some young people heading for the same school I was. I passed very few, though.

However, my journey to school that day was decidedly different than it had been every other day. Everyone I passed looked at me. And I

was absolutely positive that though it was very, very quiet—almost so quiet as to escape my hearing—each one of them let out something akin to a giggle. Of this, I was certain.

It's true.

I'm positive.

They each saw me and then began to ridicule me! The housewives and then the students, they all noticed me and laughed.

I was astonished. *Why? Why should they laugh at me?*

"Hey, look at that guy. There's something wrong with him, huh?"

"Ew, how awful. I wish he wouldn't leave his house."

"Ha ha ha. He looks like such an idiot."

It couldn't be… probably wasn't… might not have been… just a persecution complex on my part.

Listening carefully, I was sure I had heard them, their voices mocking me.

Ever since then…

Ever since then, I have been afraid of going outside…

The speakers crackled. "That's right. Those people who laughed at you were interference operatives. It's definitely not just a persecution complex, Mr. Satou. They used your easily hurt, naive soul against you, setting you up to become a hikikomori."

Ah! That's what happened! At that moment, the deep darkness that had covered my spirit for such a long time finally was driven away.

In short, up to this point, someone had been psychologically manipulating me. Thinking about things that way, everything now made perfect sense! Who could have done such a thing? Why?

I had no idea. No idea at all.

Just then, my television suddenly whispered, "The N.H.K. is operated with the help of subscribers like you." Those words, usually barely noticeable, began to agitate me for some reason. *N.H.K…* I felt that, within those three letters of the alphabet, some kind of grave secret might be hiding.

This absolutely was not some simple delusion of grandeur or ridiculous nonsense. Even though I was currently right in mid-trip on a powerful hallucinogen, it didn't mean that I had lost my ability to make a sober judgment. In fact, my brain was working far better than it had in the previous twenty-two years of my entire life.

One plus one equals two. Two plus two equals four. Look, *my logical thought processes work perfectly!*

That's why I need to think. Right now, I need to think!

N.H.K. In those three letters hides a tremendous secret having to do with me.

For all intents and purposes, it was nothing more than a simple hunch, but I could no longer have any doubt about its accuracy. We might as well call the idea a divine revelation. It wouldn't even be an exaggeration to call this enlightenment.

However, hm… My prior familiarity with N.H.K. came to mind. Thinking about it, I remembered that when I was little, I had liked N.H.K. In elementary school, I saw *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water*.[7] It was such an interesting anime.

Huh. Anime…

Mentioning anime brings up images of *otaku*.[8] When it comes to otaku, they tend to be poor at human contact. People who are poor at human contact tend to become hikikomori.

Really?

I see! At this point, the direct connection between N.H.K. and hikikomori finally should be obvious to everyone. In short, by broadcasting such interesting anime, N.H.K. mass-produced anime otaku, thereby essentially creating hikikomori on a large scale. *Dammit! What a dirty thing to do!*

However, now I had stumbled upon their conspiracy. Having come this far, I was only a step away from the perfect solution to the mystery. Resting my head on the kotatsu, I devoted myself to thought.

Thanks to the drugs, my field of vision was spinning. All the furniture in my room cheered for me in unison.

Right! With the help of my furniture friends, no one could stop me. It wasn't as though the cowardly interference operatives would pursue me forever and ever. *This is the time to counterattack. I'll make you all regret having mocked me.*

Only one more step…

I'm this close to solving all these mysteries. TV, kotatsu, computer, please lend me your strength!

And then, at that moment, I had a divine revelation. Specifically, it was sent directly to my brain in the form of a proverb: "The name says it all."[9]

Basically, the very name N.H.K. should reveal the reality of the organization. N.H.K. stands for "Nippon Housou Kyoukai,"[10] but that couldn't be all it meant. Another meaning, a secret double-meaning, had to exist.

N.H.K., N.H.K., N.H.K.… I kept mumbling these three letters to myself, over and over again.

N stands for Nippon. If that's so, then H must be…

I understood! It was all so simple! The mystery was finally solved. I had discovered the truth behind everything. H stood for Hikikomori! In other words, N.H.K. represented "Nippon Hikikomori Kyoukai"![11]

My battle began that day.

While I was tripping on hallucinogens, I failed to realize that the reason my apartment door wouldn't open was due to nothing more than the fact that I had locked it. That was just the tiniest of issues at hand, though.

No matter what, I have to fight it out. Until the day I have defeated the N.H.K., I must fight it out bravely. I absolutely will not lose.

Though sometimes, I do want to die…

Chapter 02

Jihad

Part One

Several months after the night I'd decided to fight the N.H.K., I looked out the apartment window at the neighborhood park across the street. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom—a cheerful, endlessly beautiful scene.

However, no victory was in view. I saw no sign that I would win this battle.

For starters, I didn't know where my enemy was hiding.

I thought maybe I should blow up the N.H.K. headquarters.

No, if I did something like that, I'd just be shot and killed by the police. I rejected that plan.

Most important, I knew my enemy was the N.H.K. I had to believe this—or at least pretend that I believed it. That had to be it. I needed to

refrain from making any careless moves.

If I continued like this, my situation would never improve.

Recently, I'd been increasingly depressed over the signs of spring, which mercilessly invaded even my gloomy six-mat, one-room apartment.

Another student had arrived to replace the one who had just vacated the apartment next door. Now, freshmen walked along the road to school, smiles spread across their faces. Opening the window let in a cool spring breeze, cherry blossom petals, or people's lively voices.

Argh, how could this happen? I alone had been left behind by the gaieties of spring. No, more than that: I was being actively mocked by the rest of the entire world, ail of which was in high spirits due to spring's onset. At least, that was the message I got.

I hadn't had proper contact with another human being for almost a year.

I felt like I might forget how to speak Japanese if I kept going at this rate. I sensed that I was constantly getting farther and farther from my return to society. That would not be good; it would be very bad. If I didn't escape from my life as a hikikomori soon, I would be socially laid to rest by the world forever.

First, I needed to consider my independence. I knew I had to find work. Thus, I recently bought a job information magazine from the convenience score. After reading through it, however, everything seemed impossible.

Oh, it's impossible. Absolutely impossible. I'm a dropout from a third-rate college, with zero qualifications. That's me. If I were the personnel manager at some company, I'd definitely never hire a hikikomori like

myself. In this day and age—when it's hard enough to get work—there's no way any company willingly would hire a useless person like me.

Eventually, though, at some point in time, every human being, no matter who, must work. That's the fact of the matter.

I couldn't just keep riding my parents' coattails forever.

And I couldn't keep tricking my parents with the worst kinds of lies like, "It's all right! Even if I did quit college with only a few qualifications, I'll have no trouble finding work! Right now, I'm studying for all kinds of certifications, including the IT-administrator certificate, the TOEFL, word processing, computing, and abacus proficiency, among other things. Please, send me just a little more allowance!"

Yeah, my time limit was approaching. It might even be just a few months away.

Before my parents stopped sending my allowance, I needed to reform my leechlike personality and escape this rotten hikikomori lifestyle.

I had to take down the N.H.K.

Could I do it? Could I do something that reckless?

The world outside my apartment was full of danger. Cars drove at fearsome speeds, cedar pollen floated on the wind, and random killers sometimes haunted the streets. Could I really launch myself into that dangerous world? Would I really be okay?

Quite honestly, I was very anxious about it.

Actually, it was impossible.

A loser like me could never lead a regular life within society. A normal social life would be impossible for someone who, just yesterday, woke at the decent hour of seven o'clock in the morning for the first time in a long while, only to lie in bed, lost in thought, until afternoon. Yes, a

decent life in conventional society would be impossible for someone who, after that, decided to take a quick nap, closing his eyes only to sleep soundly through the day and night until five o'clock this morning.

A normal life within society would be impossible for someone like me, who cried so unsuccessfully to apply Freudian analysis to last night's dream. My dream featured indulging in an impure heterosexual relationship in a small room with the female upperclassman from high school, and my analysis suggested only that it indicated a subconscious desire to indulge an impure heterosexual relationship in a small room with the female upperclassman from high school. My final result concluded, "What part of this is a dream interpretation? You're just reiterating the same thing!"

Impossible for me, who went to eat breakfast and, upon opening the refrigerator, realized that there was not a single item of food inside. Impossible for me, who then decided to ignore my empty stomach and take a bath, only to discover that I was entirely out of both soap and shampoo.

And impossible for me, who responded to the horoscope read on the TV morning show—*Virgo's luck in love is up today. An unexpected person may profess their love to you*—with the pathetic comment, "How are they going co profess it to me if I don't leave my room all day? Huh? Let's see them try it."

A normal life within society was totally impossible for me.

Argh.

Maybe I should just die!

Maybe I should just die. No. I won't die because I am a strong, capable soldier.

I was determined to live until the day I defeated the N.H.K., even if that meant I would have to crawl along the floor.

I would win or I would lose; I was still uncertain which. Anyway, what I required was a good amount of courage; thus, I needed to make efficient use of every ounce of courage in my body. For the time being, however, first I needed to make breakfast.

After slowly rising from my bed, I opened the cupboard and removed the cup of ramen I kept for emergencies. I poured hot water from the hot pot I stored on top of the refrigerator. And then I waited—listening to the faint notes of an anime song that echoed from room 202, the apartment next to mine, I waited patiently for three minutes.

Not that it was important or anything but my next door neighbor, who had just moved in this spring, really seemed to like anime. While it didn't really matter, school should have started already. Was it okay that he hadn't left his apartment? I felt like warning him, "Morning is no time to be engrossed in the theme song to *Ojamajo Doremi*.[12] You're going to be late!" Of course, I didn't do any such thing. My next door neighbor's lifestyle wasn't my concern.

While these thoughts ran through my mind, three minutes passed in what felt like a matter of seconds.

My ramen was ready.

Just then, it happened.

At the very moment that I was about to thrust my disposable chopsticks into the noodles, my doorbell's resounding "ding dong, ding dong" interrupted the entire process.

Who could it be?

Naturally, I didn't panic. The unexpected visitor disturbing my breakfast was probably just a bill collector, coming to pick up my electric utility payment. As I would be in trouble were I to lose my lifeline, I obediently put down my chopsticks and headed toward the door, still clad in my pajamas.

I flung open the door and quickly said, "Oh, electricity! The electricity, right? I can pay you now. Um, I'll pay right…"

My words trailed off. Alerted by the smile plastered across the visitor's face and the subtle aura emanating from her entire body, I realized there was no way this middle-aged woman possibly could be the bill collector for the electricity company.

"Please, forgive us for interrupting your busy schedule,"' said my visitor. The woman's face was lit by the morning sun. "We're actually handing out these pamphlets," she beamed, passing me two small pamphlets.

Printed on the cover was: "Awaken! Tower of Druaga."[13]

A refreshing spring breeze blew in through the open door. Outside, the mild, April morning was calm and cheerful.

Part Two

At Mita House's[14] room 201, the door separating the inside of my apartment from the outside was now standing open. The woman on a religious mission and me—nothing separated us any longer.

Then, I saw it. Diagonally to the right, behind the woman with the

bottomless evangelical smile, stood another woman.

Did they plan to use two people to recruit me? Were they tipping the balance of power, two against one? *How cowardly!*

Then, further realization dawned. I noticed just how young the other religious recruiter was.

For some odd reason, even on this serene April morning when the sun shone so gently, she shaded herself with a pure white parasol. Although I couldn't see her face, which was hidden by the parasol, I could tell nevertheless that she was young, particularly compared to the middle-aged woman. In fact, it was obvious that she was even younger than me.

Holding her parasol, draped in a plain, light-colored, long-sleeved dress, she gave off a sanctified, pure air. As if guarding the older woman, she stood calmly, clean and quiet.

Without my even realizing it, tears had sprung to my eyes, unbidden.

This young girl, no older than seventeen or eighteen by my estimate, was being taken advantage of by some idiotic cult. Just thinking about it, I couldn't help but feel compassion. *I mean, come on, what is this?!*

I was sure she was at that age when she would much rather be having fun. The age at which she'd rather put on some nice clothes, walk around Shibuya, and try to have impure, heterosexual relations, instead. But religions have strict commandments, such as "Thou shalt not commit adultery." She had to be suffering. It must be painful, painful, painful.

I imagined her not knowing how to deal with her feverish body each night. "God is watching, so we can't do something like this. But… but

I… I can't suppress my excited emotions. Ooh, why am I such a naughty girl? And even though God is watching… I confess. Heavenly Father!"

Those sorts of things, where commandments and sexual desire merged into one, constantly had to agonize her. Because the erotic book about nunneries I had read recently mentioned such issues, my reasoning had to be correct.

An idea suddenly hit me. If everything I surmised was accurate, then in that way, the existence of religion might not be such a bad thing after all. In fact, surprisingly, it might not even be an exaggeration to call it quite wonderful, instead.

Oh yes, it was actually obscene. Mulling it over carefully, I saw that its obscenity made it extremely wonderful indeed.

For example, an image popped into my mind of a young girl being spanked by a strict, older nun. This image was followed by salacious scenes from the witch trials that would later occur. And finally, a violent torture session took place in a stone-floored basement. The inquisitor would say, "I'll find out if you are really a witch," and then he'd prepare the triangular punishment horse! "With a whip?!" *Smack! Smack! Smack!* "Not yet?! Not yet?! Not yet?!" *Smack! Smack!* "Ahhh! I beg your mercy! Spare me! Please, forgive me!" However, no one listens to her appeals, and this seemingly endless banquet of indignities keeps escalating and escalating without end!

Fantastic!

Satisfaction!

A standing ova—

"Um…"

Suddenly, I realized that the older woman standing right in front of

me was staring at me. She anxiously inquired, "Are you all right?"

My runaway fantasies about the religious girl had hijacked my attention, not to mention my emotions. For a little while, even casual observers could see how absent minded and odd I was.

What the hell?

I desperately tried to shift to a resolute attitude.

"Ahem, ahem." I cleared my throat.

Then, like a very, very normal young person, and without letting my eyes drift in the wrong direction, I gave the older woman as intelligent a glance as I could manage.

Sure, I was clearly shaken. This, I admit.

However, having already regained emotional control, there were no longer any cracks in my armor left open to attack. After all, there was no need for me to be so flustered. I had only to reply, "Yes, I'm fine," as I shoved the two pamphlets back at her, and this whole thing would be over.

But because of my extremely long time as a hikikomori, my ability to communicate with others had deteriorated to nearly the lower level possible, which was the real reason I was so shaken by all this.

Calm down. Calm down! Say it. Just utter that one phrase, "Yes, I'm fine." Right. I'll say it in just a second. Yes, this time I'll really say it.

Most likely, it had been so long since I'd talked with anyone that my voice would sound rather hollow. The words coming out of my mouth, at least, would probably sound hollow. It was even possible that I might mutter accidentally. But why should that matter, anyway?

After all, it wasn't likely that I would ever meet this woman or the girl again. Whatever they thought of me shouldn't matter. Who cared if

they found me odd or disturbing? That's why I needed to say it. I needed to refuse their conversion outright!

Just say, "Yes, I'm fine!"

I'll say, "Yes, I'm fine!"

"Yes, I…"

At that second, my line of sight casually passed over the word "Awaken!" decorating the cover of the pamphlet I held in my right hand.

On that same cover, in black, gothic letters, was printed: "The hikikomori life is attacking our youth. Are you safe?"

The woman, noticing my gaze, further brightened her pious smile. "This is our special report for the month. We're investigating the hikikomori issue from a Biblical standpoint. Are you interested?"

It would be downright impossible to fully express the fear that ravaged me then.

Could they see through me? Was it possible this woman already knew that I was, in actuality, a hikikomori, myself? Was that why she'd gone out of her way to give me this pamphlet? It was an extremely frightening idea.

The thought that I was already identified as a worthless hikikomori by people who didn't even know me incited violent fear, chills, and shakes— culminating in a confusion that was terribly hard to endure. Regardless, I had to calm down.

I have to trick them—trick them quickly and smoothly.

"Hikikomori? Ha ha ha! How could someone like me possibly be a hikikomori?!"

Am I completely stupid? Saying something like that just made me look even more suspicious. I had to trick them more convincingly—and fast. I

needed to trick them now or come up with some excuse… something. *Come on*, I begged myself.

"Hey, th-there's no way I could be one, right? Right! I mean, no way could someone like me have spent almost a year not speaking to anyone. Or have a hikikomori life so extreme that I had to drop out of college with no job, no hope for my future, and nothing left. Or be in a state of abject despair. Or anything like those things, right?"

The older woman backed away from me. Naturally, my thoughts continued to drift idly, with no end in sight. *Someone, please stop me.*

"That's right! You're stupid, lady, so very stupid. And how rude! What do you mean by, 'The hikikomori life is attacking our youth. Are you safe?' Besides, if prayers could fix being a hikikomori, no one would suffer like that, right? And what do you people know? Even I don't understand it, so how could you people possibly get it?!"

That was it. Now, I was finished. The missionary was thoroughly frightened. She looked ready to do an about-face and place an immediate call to the police. "There's a crazy person in the apartment over there! He's dangerous!"

Ah, I am definitely dangerous. Quite dangerous. I even surprise myself! In fact, I'm stunned by my own idiocy, which caused me to overreact horrifyingly to an ordinary, everyday, pamphlet-pushing older woman. I can't take any more.

It's time for me to die. Someone like me, having disgraced themselves so badly in front of a religious person, should die as quickly as possible.

"It's fine now, ma'am, so please go home quickly. Take the girl and go away."

Oh, it's no use. It's over, it's over, it's over for me! Yeah, I'll buy a katana tomorrow. Then, I'll commit harakiri. Rather than exposing myself to any

further disgrace, I'll expose my innards and prove myself as a warrior. That's right, I'll do that… I wonder where they sell katana.

I thought of asking, "Hey, ma'am, do you know where? You don't? No, of course not. It's fine. That's not something you need to know. It's fine, so just go away. Yeah, right, right, I am very sorry. I am a hikikomori. A top-class, high-level hikikomori. There are hardly any hikikomori out there who can claim to be as worthless as I am. I'm unemployed. I'm trash. I'm a hack! I don't want you people to help, though. I'm fine, so just go away. See? Look, I'll give this back. I'll give back your two pamphlets. So, please, just go away as fast as you can, right now!"

"W-w-well then, please forgive me for bothering you at such a busy time."

Hurriedly averting her eyes, the older woman turned abruptly and prompted the girl behind her. "We're going now, Misaki. Let's walk back to the assembly hall, okay?"

Yeah, go home, go home. Go home right away. You too, Misaki, disappear quickly!

Hm? What, Misaki? What's that expression for? Even though the old lady's already left, why are you going out of your way to lower your parasol and stare into my face? What, you have a problem with something, huh? Hey, what's that look for? What the hell are you looking at? What are you laughing at? Are you making fun of me? Are you laughing at me…?!

Indeed, it appeared that I was being thoroughly ridiculed by a religious girl I didn't even know.

For just a second, she raised her parasol and looked directly into my face. She was smiling brightly. It was an adorable, mocking smile. And I wanted to die.

Because I was being laughed at by someone as crazy as a cult-loving girl; because I was being completely looked down upon; and, more than anything, because her smile was unnecessarily cute, for those various reasons…

I can't go on. I'm seriously going to die.

Goodbye.

Goodbye, religious, middle-aged woman.

Goodbye, Misaki, holding your parasol

Goodbye, goodbye, everyone.

I'll be setting off on my journey. I'll shut my apartment door, turn the lock, draw the curtains, and set off on my journey.

Sitting on my bed, I stopped myself from breathing. I tightly covered my mouth with both hands to stop my breath. *That hurts. It hurts. But soon, I'll die.* I'd been holding my breath for thirty seconds. Surely, I had to die momentarily.

However, my moment of death wouldn't come. The reason was because breath was leaking in through my nose.

Nothing in the world works the way we want. *Someone, please do something.*

Chapter 03

The Meeting

Part One

Despite everything, I had come back to life, my depression deeper and direr than Lake Baikal or the Mariana Trench from yesterday's confrontation.

For the first time in months, I ventured outside in broad daylight and headed to the lively city. It was such a brave and heroic act, it truly deserved a shower of applause from the whole world. I wanted to praise myself.

But everything was in vain.

All that remained was hopelessness. *I can't go on like this!*

Returning to my apartment, I holed up in my room and started drinking to erase the painful thoughts. Seated at the kotatsu, I tried shouting, "Sake! Bring me more sake!" That itself, however, was nothing

more than an empty phrase spoken to myself, and in the dim evening, in that six-mat room, it echoed in dreary misery.

Several empty beer cans already were rolling around on top of the kotatsu. Increasingly irked by the anime songs blaring from the room next door, I rashly indulged in even more alcohol.

My head spun terribly, and I grew dizzy.

Just a little more. I'll forget everything after just a little more.

That morning, having picked myself up after the previous day's low spirits, I had decided to escape my hikikomori life as quickly as possible.

That's when it hit me. *I'll find a part-time job today.*

Why not? If I couldn't begin a career, I could start with a part-time job. If I did that, my tide would shift from "hikikomori" to "freeter."[15] Both terms implied being useless, but freeter sounded far healthier than hikikomori. So, I decided to search for a part-time job right away.

I headed to the convenience store and bought a part-time employment information magazine. Walking home quickly, I started seriously perusing the material.

Which one? Which part-time job would suit me best?

I dismissed the idea of heavy labor. After all, I wouldn't want anything that would make me tired. Furthermore, the idea of working at a convenience store made me recoil, too. No way could I qualify for that sort of customer-service job.

Then… oh!

"Manga café, 700 yen per hour."

There was no mistake: This job suited me perfectly! There shouldn't be too many customers coming to a small-town manga café, after all—and when I was bored, I could read manga at the register. It seemed like a really simple job. This would be the best thing for me.

With that in mind, I wrote up a resumé and triumphantly left my apartment.

The manga café was in front of the subway station, behind a McDonald's. Heading there, I plodded and stomped through a residential area in the cool April air. And as I walked through the city by day for the first time in several months, I again was interfered with by "them." The N.H.K. interference operatives mocked me cruelly as I walked, my shoulders slumped, trudging along the sidewalk's edge.

These were fierce interference measures.

"Hey, look at that. It's so gross."

"It's an unemployed hikikomori. The worst kind."

"You should go back to your apartment. This town is no place for people like you."

The passing housewives, high school girls, and older women all murmured these things each time I passed. I turned completely pale.

Oh, I want to go home.

I wanted to go back to my dim, comfortable, six-mat, one-room apartment, to sink into my warm bed, dose my eyes, and not have to think of anything. But I couldn't. That would be no good. After all, if I did that, it would just go to their heads even more. *I must bear it. This is a battle in which I must do my best.*

In reality, I had some idea that this would happen. I knew from the start that there was no way they would leave me alone once I began my

return to society. That's why I couldn't lose. Forcing myself to suppress the anxiety that grew with every step, I approached my destination at a brisk pace.

Finally, I reached Break Time, the small, cozy-looking manga café behind the station that would become my place of employment from now on. I resolved to work here every day, starting tomorrow.

My escape from the hikikomori life was imminent.

While it troubled me that I had become this anxious just from walking around the city during the day, I probably just needed to get used to it. If I could become a freeter, my overabundance of neuroses should disappear in moments.

Yes, it was finally time.

I had to be brave and take my first step inside. Forcefully, I banged open the door and entered the shop. I visualized offering my resumé to the girl at the register, announcing energetically, "I heard you're hiring part-time workers here."

I began to speak, but my sentence broke off, midstream.

For behind the counter, where ashtrays, hot pots, and coffee makers were lined up in an orderly fashion, a lone female employee sat in a chair, reading manga. Her profile and the intent look in her eyes as she flipped through a *shoujo* manga brought back a strange feeling of having seen her before.

Actually, I had met her just the previous day.

Standing before the register, the words "part time" dying on my lips, I felt my body stiffen. She lifted her face from the manga in her lap, sensing me.

Our eyes met.

It was the young religious solicitor, Misaki.

Unlike the day before, she was dressed in jeans styled like what other young people wore. She didn't have a recognizably religious aura.

The second I recalled her true identity, my heart started beating at ten times its normal rate. A swirl of thoughts circulated wildly through my brain.

Why would a religious person work at a manga café? Wouldn't that violate some sort of religious precept? No, *no, that's of no concern to me—does she remember who I am, though?* If she did, that meant I was completely ruined. There couldn't be anyone where I worked who knew my secret. There was no way I could ever work with someone who knew. *If she does remember, what should I do? I have to run! As this It a reasonable and logical conclusion, for now, I should just run!*

However, right as I began to turn tail, the religious girl called me back. Dropping her harsh expression, she looked at me, the same smile of derision as the day before flitting across her face. In a small voice, she asked, "Do you work part time here?"

Clearly, I could see the vast difference between how she questioned me and the way she probably dealt with normal customers. Evidently, the girl had realized that I was the crazy hikikomori from yesterday. Cold sweat trickled down the back of my neck. I wanted to run. I wanted to leave that place as quickly as possible.

Even so, I had to answer her question and properly retract the words I had spoken earlier. As casually as possible, as utterly natural as imaginable, I had to say something.

"Bi-bi…"

"So… you like… bikes and stuff?"

What the hell am I saying?

"Oh yes, I really do… like bikes—motorbikes, that is. You can fly like the wind." A few of the customers sitting in the back began to pay attention to me. "I just love the pulse of the engine! Well, what do you think? Would you like to come riding with me some time?"

I'm done for!

"That is… I mean, I've never actually ridden one before! Ha ha ha ha ha ha…! Okay, see you."

I couldn't leave the store quickly enough.

On my way home, I stopped at the convenience store and bought beer and shochu.

Let me die. I'll just die right now.

Except I won't die. The weather is too nice. Instead of dying, I'll just drink a whole lot of alcohol to forget everything. Just forget.

Alcohol… I'll drink alcohol…

I tried shouting, "Sake! Bring me more sake!" That itself, however, was nothing more than an empty phrase spoken to myself—and in the dim evening, in that six-mat room, it echoed in dreary misery. I wanted to cry.

Everything was her fault. Because of her, my great plan to escape my hikikomori life had ended in miserable failure. At that moment, I wished for the power to bestow deadly curses. *That bitch… that bitch! G-G-Goddammit!* I imagined them laughing at me right about then. I was sure that I'd become a laughingstock.

"Boss, today, a crazy hikikomori came to the store."

"Huh, really, Misaki?"

"It seemed he planned on working here part time. But for God's sake, he's a hikikomori. Like, know your place!"

"Absolutely. There's no way an unemployed, disgusting, hikikomori college dropout could join society."

They were using me as the punch line for their sardonic comments. *Argh, how can this be? It's hard to forgive. No, I can't forgive them. I need to take my revenge… must take my revenge now! I swear I'll punish you…*

As a hikikomori, however, I couldn't think of any really effective ways to get back at them. Thus, I decided to give up momentarily and think of something different, something to make myself feel better. I wanted to forget the bad stuff and just think of good things.

Speaking of fun things, there was still the N.H.K.

Yeah, if I were feeling pain or suffering, I had merely to think of the conspiracy that the N.H.K. was engineering right beneath the surface. If I did that, I might feel at least a little better.

N.H.K., N.H.K.…

"I see! I understand!" I shouted. "That girl is a special operative for the N.H.K.!" I kept making these declarations loudly.

Despite my earlier resolve, I didn't feel better at all.

"Dammit," I cried before I finished my beer and shochu.

My head hurt, and the anime songs ringing from my next door neighbor's apartment were fiercely annoying.

Before I knew it, I had somehow ended up violently drunk. My mood was headed, full tilt, toward negativity. Once again, the future held no hope whatsoever that I could detect. I suspected that, at this

rate, I was just plummeting toward death—isolated, lonely, and looking like an asshole.

"That's it. This is the end. This is the end!" I chanted.

And still, the anime songs echoed from the room next door. In the lyrics, words like "love," "dreams," "romance," and "hope," recurred continuously—ironically. For someone like me, having lost my optimism, it all sounded very much like mean-spirited sarcasm. The words racked me with rage and self-pity.

For one thing, this was the first night my neighbor had played anime songs at such a loud volume. Usually, he played them only during the day, but it was already the middle of the night.

Then, it occurred to me: Might this not be some new harassment meant for me? Harassment toward me! Someone so pathetic and stupid that he couldn't even become a freeter!

If so, I couldn't allow it. I tried punching the wall. There was no sign that the songs would stop. I kicked at the wall. No reaction.

How dare you make a fool of me? They're all—every one of them— making a fool of me. Dammit. Just watch, I'll make you regret this.

I drank, got even drunker, drinking to deaden my senses…

I'm going, and I'll show you! You're the ones at fault.

Rising unsteadily from the kotatsu, no doubt looking like I was about to fall on my ass, I stumbled to open the door.

I tottered to room 202 and repeatedly attacked the doorbell. "Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong…"

No answer.

I tried punching the door.

No answer. The only sounds from inside were anime songs. This

particular number was the theme song to *Fancy Lala: "I am Fancy Lala…"*

In my anger, blood rushed to my head.

I twisted the doorknob. The door wasn't locked, and I no longer cared what might happen.

"Hey!" I shouted, losing myself in fury. Flinging open the door, I screamed, "It's too loud!"

At that very second, I saw him. A man sat at a computer desk in the back of the room, facing the speakers against the wall. Acknowledging the surprising arrival of a visitor, he slowly swiveled around in his spinning chair so he could look at me over his shoulder.

He was… crying.

Tears silently streamed down his cheeks.

On top of that, and even more unbelievable, I knew exactly who he was. Speechless, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Wiping his own eyes, he gazed at me in disbelief. Thrusting himself forward, he stared into my face. Finally, after a momentary silence, he stammered in a trembling voice, "Sa-Satou?"

There was no mistake. It was Yamazaki.

After four years, this was an incredibly unexpected reunion.

Part Two

In high school, I had been in the literature club.

Even so, that didn't mean I liked novels or anything of that sort. Rather, during the new-member recruitment fair, an awfully cute

upperclassman had invited me. "You there, join the literature club."

Without thinking, I had nodded. There was really nothing else I could have done. Despite being a member of the nerdy literature club, and despite being a year older than I was, the girl was as cute as a pop idol.

Unsurprisingly, having joined the club for such a stupid reason, I ended up playing solitaire through every meeting. And during any group free time, I played cards in the crowded office with the upperclassman. What in the hell were we doing? Obviously, we could have been focusing on other, more important things.

Well, that doesn't matter at all anymore. The past is the past.

Anyway, it happened after school on one of those club days. My classmate and I were walking along the first-floor hallway that faced the central courtyard. Suddenly, she pointed at one of the corners of the courtyard. "Over there!"

"Hey, that's bullying, isn't it?"

Several students had surrounded a boy wearing a middle school uniform. They were punching him in the stomach.

A weak smile appeared on the face of the boy being bullied. The ones doing the bullying, too, smiled broadly. It was the kind of scene you often saw.

"That's terrible." The cute girl broke the silence. A very empathetic person, she made a face as though she honestly felt sorry for him—at which point, an amazing idea flashed through my mind: I could show her how cool I was.

"Shall I go help him?"

"You would do that?"

I nodded. I figured that middle school brats shouldn't be any problem at all. Of course, that ended up being a huge miscalculation.

It was fine when I yelled the slogan, "Bullying isn't cool!" and waded into the fray. Not only did I get beat up, the group of bullies also got away. The girl looked at me in disgust, and the victim continued to be bullied for the entire year, so my actions were completely fruitless.

Nevertheless, Yamazaki, the boy who had been bullied, seemed to respect me—though I didn't know what kind of mistaken impression he was under. He even joined the literary club as soon as he moved up to the high school division.

By that time, I was already a third-year student. Since the older girl had graduated, I had absolutely no desire to do anything. Thus, I set him up as the president so I could focus on my entrance exam studies. Then, just like that, I simply graduated.

Except for talking to him two or three times at the graduation ceremony, I hadn't heard from Yamazaki at all since then—at least, not until this moment.

In the middle of his own six-mat, one-room apartment, Yamazaki was in exaggeratedly high spirits. He hadn't changed at all since I had last seen him. He remained slender, with hair as light as a Russian's. At first, he seemed to have become somewhat more masculine; that turned out not to be the case, though. He appeared to be a weak young man, with little combat potential.

"You? Is it really you?"

Though his eyes were swollen and red from his recent tears, he now smiled widely. The anime songs had stopped playing.

Rooted to a spot by the door, I asked hesitantly, "Why are you here?"

"What about you, Satou?"

"I…" I started to tell him that I had just happened to move into this building because it was close to my university; but unconsciously, I hesitated. I didn't want Yamazaki to learn my true status: unemployed, dropout hikikomori.

Not noticing my difficulties, Yamazaki voluntarily explained his situation. "This summer, I entered a technical school. When I looked for a cheap apartment close to school, I happened to like this one."

It really did seem to be complete chance.

"Anyway, please come in. My room is dirty, though."

The unbelievable coincidence still confused me, but Yamazaki warmly urged me inside. Obediently, I took off my shoes and stepped into the room.

Of course, the layout was no different than my room.

But… what was this? I stood frozen in place.

There was a strange atmosphere to Yamazaki's room, an extremely faint air that I had never before experienced. The room contained odd posters stuck haphazardly to the walls, two gigantic computer towers, a mountain of manga that nearly reached the ceiling, and various other kinds of furniture and decorations. Everything combined to create a peculiar, troubled ambiance.

"Please, have a seat there." Yamazaki's voice brought me back to reality.

Following his directive, I unsteadily ventured deeper into his room.

Suddenly, something shattered at my feet with a loud crack. I jumped nervously.

"Oh, that's just a CD case," Yamazaki said, "Don't worry about it."

Manga, novels, videotapes, DVDs, plastic bottles, empty tissue boxes, and other rubbish littered the entire floor.

"My room is rather dirty."

This was an understatement. I had never seen such a filthy room.

"Still, I'm really happy. I never would have guessed that I lived next door to you, Satou." Seated on the edge of the bed, Yamazaki spoke with a faraway look in his eyes, paying no mind as I trampled something different with each step.

Finally, I reached the computer desk and sat in the revolving chair.

My drunkenness had worn off. It had worn off completely.

Not knowing what to say, I stared at his seventeen inch monitor. It displayed a wallpaper for an anime I didn't recognize.

"It's strange that we've never run into each other here, even though it's been half a month since I moved in."

I half listened to him while examining the figurine displayed on top of the monitor. The model was an elementary school girl carrying a red schoolbag on her back.

Meanwhile, Yamazaki droned on. "This must be what they mean by urban disinterest in one's neighbors."

One poster affixed to his wall showed a naked girl who couldn't be older than elementary school age, drawn, predictably, in anime style. I looked back at his computer desk.

"What's wrong? Satou, you're so quiet. Oh, I guess my music was too loud, right? I'll be careful next time."

On top of the desk, there were piles of square boxes that appeared to be some kind of computer games. They were decorated with loads of intimidating labels—stuff like "torture," "wet," "abuse," "lewd," "tie," "academy," "confinement," "rape," "savage," "pure love," "training," "adventure"—things one didn't typically see. And of course, above the piles, was the nude drawing of the elementary school student. A sticker on it advised, "Not for those under 18 years of age."

Once again, I hurriedly looked away, this time toward the mountain of manga next to the wall.

Yamazaki continued his monologue. "Anyway I'm very happy, Satou. I never thought I'd get to see you again, and I really respect you. Did you know that? You did, didn't you?"

Picking up one of the manga, I flipped through it. Naturally, I found the nude form of a girl, who could be nothing but elementary school aged, along with a yellow mark for "Adult Comics."

"Have you heard of the school I'm attending? I'm sure you've probably seen it in a TV commercial…"

I returned the book to the pile. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I asked, "What school are you going to?"

At my question, Yamazaki puffed out his chest and started to reply.

Without intending to, I rolled my eyes toward heaven.

It was several years earlier. We had been dreaming. It was the effect of the dim life in a dirty school building, beautiful young girls, and boys laughing despite the gloom. I, and everyone else, had been dreaming. In

the midst of that surreal time, we all had been dreaming of a wonderful future.

Those were the days when we were always in the club offices after school, spending the slow time with the upperclassmen. We nervously smoked cigarettes behind a shabby, old prefab hut that looked as though an earthquake would flatten it instantaneously. We didn't have part-time jobs, we didn't throw ourselves into our clubs, we had bad grades, and we had no motivation at all. Even though I was a high school student headed absolutely nowhere, I was always smiling.

On one day, something happened: In our club office, where trash and assorted scraps littered the floor, the cute upperclassman and I had been spacing out. "Satou, what're you going to do in the future?" she asked.

"First, I'll attend some college… I don't really know what I'll do, but I should be able to find something I like while I'm there."

"Hm…"

She looked away. Suddenly, she murmured, "Remember your recent plan to rescue that kid being bullied? It was so stupid, but you looked kind of cool. You'll be fine, Satou. You'll definitely be fine."

I was embarrassed.

Time passed. She graduated. Later, in the same club office, Yamazaki and I sat there. I glared at my math book. Yamazaki said, "Satou, you'll graduate this year."

"That's right, so you'll be the president from now on. Work hard."

"It'll be lonely. Everyone's getting older."

"Don't say that kind of stuff while you're young. Want a smoke?" Taking a cigarette out of my pocket, I offered it to Yamazaki, who took

it.

Cautiously, he lit it. He launched into a magnificent fit of coughing. Eyes watering, he said, "I hope it goes well."

"What goes well?"

"All kinds of things. I hope that I can continue this kind of happy daily life. You should work hard, too, Satou, and so will I. I'll leave with high spirits, and everything will be okay, somehow."

Yamazaki was filled with both hope and anxiety. In that shabby club office, filled with the light of the setting sun, we laughed as though we were dreaming.

Then, I went on to college—but I dropped out. Frightened of my futureless life, scared by my foolish anxieties, unable to see ahead and aiming nowhere, I continued ceaselessly living my ridiculously idiotic life. I was beset on all sides by invisible worries.

So, I shut myself in and slept. I slept until sleep exhausted me. Spring passed, summer ended, fall came, and then winter arrived. Then, it turned into another gentle spring.

My forward progress to the future had stopped, and I was at my wit's end. The cool night breeze felt good, and I continued to sleep.

And then, one day, we met again. Yamazaki and I had met again. He'd been a weak, bullied boy, but Yamazaki was still a pretty good guy. All this time, we'd been inhaling the same city air.

Although neither of us could see anything concrete in our futures, we still were looking forward.

Even now, I could remember it clearly—us in the club office that I missed so much, the setting sun shining through the narrow windows during our innocent conversations. "What's going to happen to us?"

"Whatever happens will happen."

"I guess so."

That pleasant, gentle time after school.

We had been young and stupid. We were worthless, helpless, and couldn't even have imagined ourselves four years in the future.

Having run into Yamazaki again for the first time in several years, I asked, "Where are you going to school?"

Yamazaki proudly puffed up his chest at my question and answered, "Yoyogi Animation Institute."[16]

Life was so strange…

"What are you doing now?" he asked me.

"I dropped out."

Yamazaki looked away, and an uncomfortable silence passed.

Finally, in an unnaturally cheerful voice, I said, "By the way, why were you crying?"

"I haven't been going to school lately. I didn't really blend in with the other students, I didn't have any friends, and I just started living alone. In despair, I was playing my CDs as loud as I could…"

"You've been shut in here all the time these days?"

"Th-that's right"

I stood up quickly. "Wait just a second," I said, and I went back to my own room.

I returned to Yamazaki's room, carrying beer cans in both hands. 'Let's drink!"

"What?"

"It's fine. Let's just drink." I handed a beer to Yamazaki. "It's okay. The day when you can escape from being a hikikomori definitely will twine."

Truthfully, I was noisily professing my own desires. "It's okay, Yamazaki. I'm a professional when it comes to being a hikikomori. As long as I'm with you, your situation can't get any worse!"

With that, we drank. We turned the anime songs back on and got drunk enough that consciousness evaporated. Our party continued late into the night. Once the anime CD ended, we started singing our own songs. Because we both were incredibly inebriated, we might have just dreamt that these were wonderful songs.

Even if it was a dream, that's fine. I sang with vigor.

The Hikikomori Song

Lyrics and Music by Satou Tatsuhiro

The freezing cold, six-mat, single room—
Oh, this apartment:
Even though I want to leave, my escape is still distant.
I lie on the bed, even while awake, and sleep sixteen hours a day.
Near the shadows of the kotatsu,
A cockroach is hiding.

When I eat, I have one meal a day.
And I lose weight every day.

Sometimes, I head to the convenience store,
The gazes of others frighten me, though.
A cold sweat even springs forth,
Telling me how hard it is to escape my apartment.
N.H.K., which seems like a fantasy—
There is emptiness in searching and not finding it.
Today, when the sun sets, I go weakly forth
To lie down in my damp bed.
My tired and heavy brain—
Oh, I can't go on. I can't go on!

Because I had used the pornographic comics as a pillow when I fell asleep on the floor, I woke up with a terrible headache. Yamazaki had dozed off, resting his head on his desk.

I gently shook his shoulders. "What about school?"

"I'm taking today off"

Saying this, Yamazaki closed his eyes again.

Returning to my own room, I sprawled across my bed. I swallowed an aspirin and went back to sleep.

Chapter 04

Road to the Creator

Part One

The exit was blocked. I could see no hope. There was nothing I could do. And because of some stupid daydream about the N.H.K. as the evil organization that controls the world, I had lost even the means to divert myself.

It was a spring of unending, depressive anxiety for me—the kind of spring that made me want to imitate Vincent Gallo in *Buffalo 66*. Entering the bathroom, I grasped my head and moaned, "I just can't go on living."

I need to die.

Today was already different from every other day, though. Something surprising had happened earlier.

After waking up at one in the afternoon, I found an unfamiliar slip

of paper in the mail slot. Picking it up, I examined it.

It was the resumé that I had written several days earlier for the part-time job at the manga café. I had written it for that particular job application, a memory that I now wanted to forget completely.

Why? Why was it in my mail slot?

I hurried next door to Yamazaki's apartment.

Yamazaki was taking the day off from school again. Seated at his computer, he was playing some sort of game.

I asked, "Did a religious solicitor come by today?"

"Hm… they came about two hours ago. I got some of those pamphlets. I just love the word-for-word translation. Why? Didn't they go to your apartment, too, Satou?"

I suddenly saw the frightening truth behind Yamazaki's testimony. Apparently, I had left my resume behind in the manga café. I could no longer remember if it had fallen from my pocket or if I automatically had handed it to Misaki. Because of the massive shock, my memories of that moment were muddled.

Only one thing was certain: While making her religious rounds, Misaki had gone out of her way to bring me the resumé. In other words, when I had asked, "Do you like bikes?" in a clumsy effort to conceal that I had, indeed, come to apply for a part-time job, I had failed utterly. Realizing this, nothing at all seemed to matter anymore. When humans run into an extremely embarrassing circumstance, it seems their emotions go numb.

"Who cares?" I whispered, heading to the trash can to throw away the paper. As I did, the back of the resume caught my eye. A message was written there in black ballpoint pen: *"You have been selected join my*

project. Please, come to the Mita Fourth District Park tonight at nine o'clock."

Eh? My mouth had fallen open as I squatted in front of the trash can.

Now, objectively considering it, I saw that this was an earth-shattering situation. I had received a mysterious letter from a girl I had met twice. Really, it was so incredibly incomprehensible that I had no idea at all what was going on. So, I obediently went along with it.

The park was only a two-minute walk from my apartment. It was already night. The roadside trees grew at even intervals. There was the old jungle gym, the bench with flaking paint, and the towering streetlights in front of the swings, illuminating everything with a dim blue glow. I liked this park.

On my weekly, nocturnal supply trips to the convenience store, I always made sure to stop here. Empty, the space belonged to me alone.

I enjoyed the cool night breeze. Seated on the bench, if I looked up at the sky, I could see the faintly waving branches of the trees and, through them, the moon and the stars. It was a place to relax and release my worries.

Tonight, the park wasn't just my personal space, though. Someone else was there.

I didn't call out. In fact, my stomach felt hollow.

What are you trying to do? What are you thinking? Who on Earth are you? These questions accompanied a growing rage, yet my mind remained clear for some reason. I was even calm, my thoughts moving in an orderly manner, with no threat of spinning out of control.

This may have been a form of resignation. Perhaps I had finally accepted my current situation. It was wholly possible I had quietly admitted to myself that I was a hikikomori, a person with no future,

someone who should just die. Yes, that had to be the explanation.

Lately I had been living in the past. Every night, I dreamed of long ago: the hometown I yearned for, friends, family, things I hadn't liked, things that had made me happy, other various memories—fragments of all these things. My nightly dreams were gentle and melancholy.

Indeed, the future had ceased to be a problem. It already had been decided, which was precisely why I needed to exist in the past—in my wonderful, comforting memories. While this was obviously an extreme form of backward escapism, I didn't care anymore.

Yes, that's right. I am a hikikomori, a worthless person with a weak spirit. Is that a problem? Just leave me alone, and I'll disappear quietly. I'm fine! It's all over!

"No, no, no…" I sat on the bench, head in hands.

"'No,' what?" the girl inquired. She was rocking in one of the swings near the bench. Her almost shoulder-length hair blew lightly in the wind. Tonight, too, she was dressed like an average teenage girl—no parasol, no pamphlets, and no discernible religious atmosphere.

However, I forbade myself to let down my guard. More than anything about her, the very strangeness of the situation spoke vividly of how truly odd she was. I had to deal with her calmly, but with total caution.

Right then and there, I decided to think of her as an ASIMO, the bipedal robot developed by Honda. If I did that, it would keep me on an even keel. *Why not? Nowadays, robot technology is really coming along. No matter how I examine it, it looks exactly like a person.*

Rocking slightly back and forth in the swing, the robot asked, "Why did you run away earlier? We're short-staffed right now and could really

use the help. We would have decided to hire you right away."

Wow! The voice output was perfect, too. The joints moved smoothly, legs extending flexibly from its skirt Japans technical skill truly is the best in the world, isn't it?

"Seeing as you're a hikikomori, did you get scared of working in the outside world and reconsider halfway through your application?" She drove right to the heart of the matter—in the end, though, they were just a robot's words. No matter what a machine might say, no one would get that angry.

The robot continued to say even more mysterious things. "Don't worry. I know how to escape from being a hikikomori."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I finally reacted to her words.

"Satou, right? Well, you're really a hikikomori, aren't you?"

Instead of immediately answering her question, I pointed at the sign hanging over the park entrance. It warned, "Beware of perverts! Young girls have been continually targeted," in caustic red paint.

I said, "Are you sure it's all right to meet a shady person like me at this time of night? I could be dangerous."

"It's okay. My house is right over there, so I know all kinds of things. For instance, you're always spacing out in this park on Sunday nights, right? I saw you from my window."

Having come this far, I was pretty anxious about all this. I couldn't figure out what she wanted. Her real motives remained a mystery, and nothing seemed normal. Could it be some sort of roundabout religious solicitation?

"No, it's not. I'm just going along to help Auntie Kazuko."

"Huh?"

"Because I'm always troubling her, I figured it's the least I could do to repay her."

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but she continued our awkward conversation as we both stared at the streetlamps. "Anyway, none of that matters. Satou, don't you want to know? About how to escape from being a hikikomori?"

"Don't call me Satou. I'm older than you."

"You know my age?"

"Well, you look about seventeen, maybe eighteen."

"You're absolutely right!"

Gathering momentum from the swing, she leapt off lightly. The display of energy seemed intentional. It might have been my imagination, though. After she landed, she came over to where I sat on the bench and looked straight at me. Crouching, her hands resting on her knees, she said, "You want to know how to escape, right? I'll teach you."

Once again, the same unnecessarily cute smile that I'd seen before floated across her face. I was unable to think of her as a successor to the ASIMO model any longer. Looking away, I whispered, "I'm not a hikikomori."

"Liar. How can you say that even though you completely gave it away when Auntie tried talking to you the other day? Even though you ran away when you realized it was me at the manga café? Normal, people don't do stuff like that."

"Hey!" I sputtered.

"You're scared, right? Of other people?"

As I lifted my head, our eyes met. She had big eyes, with large pupils.

Gazing into those eyes, I was at a loss for words.

In the end, without saying anything, I looked away again.

Suddenly, I realized that somewhere along the way, the wind had started blowing harder. Over our heads, the branches of the trees were stirring. It was a chilly night.

I decided to go back to my apartment. Standing, I turned my back on her. From behind me, she tried to stop me. "Wait!" she called, "You'll regret this."

"What are you talking about? For starters, who are you, anyway?"

"I'm a kind girl who helps worthless hikikomori."

'And what's this 'project' that you mentioned in your letter?"

"At the current juncture, details of the project are top secret. However, you can rest assured that I won't do anything bad."

I started feeling sick, so I decided to tell a suitable lie and just get away from that place. "I'm not just any regular hikikomori, you know. It's true that I shut myself away, but it's for my job. I have to."

"What's your job?"

"S-SOHO…"

"What's that?"

"It's short for *'so*meone who works from *ho*me.' I work from my apartment… or rather, my home office. I'm not a deadbeat. Although I'm definitely a shut in, it's part of my job description, and I can't do anything about that! Trying to get a part-time job was just a momentary miscalculation on my part…"

"Huh. Really? What kind of work do you do?"

"D-don t be surprised when you hear this. I'm a creator!" *That's right*, I thought, *marvel at my job title!* "Because I do creative work, I may act a

bit psychologically unusual, but that only proves my incredible talent! I'm not just some good-for-nothing, jobless guy!"

Misaki grinned and casually asked, "What are you creating?"

"That is… you know, what do you call it, the latest, revolutionary information technology. I can't really explain it in one word…"

"Well, let me know when you've finished what you're currently working on, okay?"

"N-no, I can't do that. It's privileged information that I can't divulge. Not to mention that we have tons of money invested in this project, so I can't just give it away so easily…"Just as I had begun to wish for death due to the thorough stupidity of the lines I was giving her, Misaki turned away.

"It was a waste, huh? I did offer to show you how to escape, after all." She really seemed to think this lost opportunity was unfortunate. In a low whisper, she said, "Even though you'll never have this chance again…"

Only her outline was faintly visible against the backlighting provided by the streetlamps.

I was a little… no, fairly excited.

My bad habit prompted me to keep gushing. "It seems you doubt what I'm saying; I am actually a really amazing creator, though. A young girl like you probably wouldn't be aware of this, but I'm sort of well known within the industry. Yeah, when I see you next time, I'll tell you all about it. About my work. You'll be really surprised! You'll respect me!"

Why did I say, "when I see you next time"? What did I mean by "my work"? Why did I always broadcast these lies, all of which easily could be

disproved? I could just be honest and say, "I'm a jobless hikikomori!" Why was I indulging in this strange pride over such weird things?

Whatever. It didn't matter. I should just run. I should just get out of there fast before I dug myself in any deeper. "W-well then, see you!"

Uncertainly, I headed toward the park exit. Behind me, she might have muttered something, but I couldn't hear the words.

Part Two

Back at my apartment building, I interrogated my neighbor. "Yamazaki, how can one become a creator?"

"Huh? What's this, all of a sudden?"

"I have to become a creator right away. You're a student at the Yoyogi Animation Institute, aren't you? Don't you know a lot about that kind of stuff?"

"No. Well, I guess I do. Are you serious?"

"I'm serious. I'm completely serious. Anything will do. Just tell me how I can become a creator right away! Please?"

"I'm hanging up. Come over."

The shock of the situation had been enough to force me into calling my next door neighbor. It was the first phone call I'd made in months.

"When I see you next time, I'll tell you all about my work." Only a few

minutes earlier, I actually had said this. I had inflated my chest with pride and preposterously said this aloud. *When I see you next…*

I suspected that this would not be far in the future. Misaki seemed to live nearby. I might even run across her in town, completely by chance. By that time, I had to change my huge, incredibly stupid lie into reality. I needed to become a true creator. What was a creator, anyway? *What is it?*

Yamazaki, seated at his computer as usual, condensed my situation. "In short, Satou, you told a horrible lie because you were trying to look good in front of a cute girl. And now you're flustered and trying to conceal the fact that you lied. Does that about sum it up?"

Blushing, I nodded. *I don't care if you scorn me, Yamazaki. You already know my real identity as an unemployed, hikikomori dropout! There's no secret more embarrassing that you could possibly discover. Help me, Yamazaki!*

"Oh, don't worry. I won't make fun of you or anything. Hm…"

Yamazaki folded his arms and groaned, deep in thought. I sat on the floor and meekly waited for him to speak. However, his next words made no sense whatsoever. "To begin with, no matter how much a real girl looks down on you, does it really matter?"

"Eh?"

"Listen to me, Satou. Women… they aren't people. No, they're not normal humans. In fact, it might not be an exaggeration to say that they're unbelievably close to being inhuman monsters. Therefore, there's no need to go out of your way like this. What does it matter if you're scorned by some female?"

His expression was as calm as usual.

I abruptly became very uncomfortable.

He continued, "Those things don't have proper human hearts. They look human, but they're different creatures. Satou, it's best if you first understand this fact."

"Ya-Yamazaki… "

"Ha ha ha! Well, anyway, it's not really that big of a deal. No matter what the reason for your decision to become a creator, the idea's probably not half bad. It's fine. Let's think about this together."

Rising from his computer desk, he sat down before me. His actions were infused with a bizarre confidence. Apparently, a four-year span radically could change someone's personality. Yamazaki now seemed to be twisting in a dangerous emotional direction. However, at this point, that didn't matter at all. If it would help solve my problem, I'd bowed down to a demon.

"No, no. There's no need to bow to me. Let's start. Briefly, there are all different kinds of creators, Satou—what would you like to do?"

"What? Like I said, I want to be a creator…"

"There's no job called 'creator'!" Yamazaki's voice grew rough. "It's just a general term for jobs like writing or drawing comics. Basically, a 'creator' is simply someone who makes something. So, what would you like to make, Satou? That's what I'm asking."

"Anything, as long as I can be called a creator."

"Argh." Yamazaki tightened his right hand into a fist. Then, as if he had regained control of himself, he let out a heavy sigh. "Well, let's just go with that. Okay then, Satou, what kind of skills do you have?"

"What do you mean, 'skills'?"

"Like, can you draw, or write songs, or write amazing computer

programs? There are all sorts of possibilities."

"I can't do anything. If I had to say something, I suppose I have a talent for solitude. I've been able to live for an entire year without meeting anyone—"

"That won't do at all!" Yamazaki slammed the floor with both hands.

"Like I said, I'm worthless!" I screamed back.

Yamazaki stood and grilled me with greater force. "There's no way someone with no skills easily could become a creator, is there?! It's not right to say whatever's easy for you, all the time. Listen to me, you laughed when I told you that I was going to the Yoyogi Animation Institute, didn't you, Satou? Oh, it's fine, no need to hide it… Still, it's clear that in terms of *creative* issues, I'm more accomplished than you are. Please understand this."

As he'd been pretty convincing during his long diatribe, I nodded automatically several times.

Suddenly, Yamazaki's body went limp. "No, thinking of the idiots in my class, I got overexcited. People like them make me the maddest—people who are all talk, huddling privately together, even though they can't do anything themselves."

It appeared I'd somehow irritated his issues with school life. I decided to make him drink some coffee to calm him down. Salvaging an unused paper cup from the litter strewn across the floor, I poured water from the hot pot set up in the cabinet. Then, fishing farther under the bed, I discovered an economy-sized pack of rice crackers.

Eating the crackers, we drank coffee.

Calmer, Yamazaki returned to the main topic. "Well then, let's think about it more concretely this time. Music takes a lot of skill and

discriminating taste, so that's out of the question for you, Satou. As for programming, you're no good at math, right? So, that's out. Art also would be impossible, wouldn't it? I once saw a picture you drew. So, illustrating manga won't work. Then…"

Yamazaki suddenly slapped his knee. "Satou, you were a member of the literary club, weren't you?!"

"So…?"

"Novels! It's novels!"

I twisted my face into a frown. "No, I don't want to do that! I haven't written any long compositions since they made me do it in middle school. For starters, novels are too boring. They won't work—"

Yamazaki scowled at me again. Breathing violently through his nose, he muttered quietly, "Just get over it, won't you?"

I felt a light touch of fear and decided to change the subject.

"B-by the way, Yamazaki, what are you studying at school? Is it anime, after all? Are you painting cels and stuff?"

Yamazaki shook his head. "Even though the school is called the Yoyogi Animation Institute, there are many different departments. I'm in the Game Creation department."

Game Creation? The second I heard that phrase, it excited me. "Game creator." That had resonance; the title sounded so cutting-edge. The glamor industry of the modern age. The number one job that elementary students wanted. I pictured an industry giant driving around in a Lamborghini, being entertained at a high-class club in Ginza. He had wads of cash flying around as he was wooed by headhunters, hanging out amid the huge, long lines for his latest super-popular game. Then, some dreadful high school student would steal one of these in-

demand games from an elementary school kid, and the story would be picked up by the six o'clock news. The game creator would be filthy rich.

It was high-salaried, with a yearly pay of one hundred million yen! It was so cool! It was perfect!

Finishing off my coffee in one gulp, I grabbed Yamazaki's hand. "Let's try to become game creators together!"

It was past eleven o'clock at night. Yamazaki was sipping his tenth cup of instant coffee, and I was so hungry that I made some instant ramen.

Yamazaki grew angry. "Don't just take food from someone's stockpile without asking!"

I bowed my head in apology and put some pepper on the noodles. While I was slurping at the ramen, Yamazaki stammered, "I-It would be impossible for beginners to make games."

"You have to help me with that."

"Modern games are a comprehensive art. A decent game can be created only by mixing various specialized skills. Someone like you couldn't do it, Satou."

"After not seeing you for a short while, you've started speaking really insolently, haven't you?" was what I felt like saying to give him a hard time. After thinking about it, however, I realized he'd actually been insolent for a long time. Yeah, that was true. Even though he'd been a weakling, he was the kind of guy who said whatever he wanted to whomever he wanted. He'd openly call his classmates idiots or tell them to go away. That's why he was picked on. It was totally his own fault.

He'd spoken politely to me; but once he found out that I'd become an unemployed, dropout hikikomori, it was only a matter of time before he started making fun of me, calling me "worthless" to my face. All that didn't matter, though. For now, I had to do whatever it took to become a game creator. I had to become an industry insider. *Please, Yamazaki…*

"I can see it's difficult for you to ask me for help. However, there are things that can't be done, no matter how much you beg, Satou."

"Please, do something to help me!"

"For one thing, there's no way that something you started to earn a girl's respect could last for long. It's obvious that you'll lose you motivation soon."

"That's not true! I'm serious! I'm passionate!"

"I have school tomorrow. I'm tired already."

"It's not just wanting Misaki's respect. If I could become a game creator, I'd be able to escape my life as a hikikomori, wouldn't I?!"

"It's impossible."

"No, it can't be!" I insisted.

"It won't work."

"Yes, it will."

I spent another hour pleading with him. I tried appeasing him, coaxing him, yelling at him—and finally, I tried wheedling to get on his good side. "While you're at school, I could tape the anime on TV. I'd even cut out the commercials for you."

At last, Yamazaki gave in. "Well, Satou, you seem to be really committed." His voice was serious.

"Yeah. I do mean it. I'm totally committed."

"If so, there's one way that even you, Satou, could become a game

creator. But…"

"But?"

"It may actually be the bloodiest path, an unendingly severe and painful method that would make *anyone* want to abandon the course, not to mention someone like you, Satou."

Yamazaki's face was grave, and I gulped reflexively. My determination had already taken shape, though. *I'll do it, no matter what*. "I'll do anything," I said.

"Is that really true?"

I nodded.

"Absolutely true? You can't just say, 'I'm done,' in the middle, okay?"

I made a show of nodding deeply again.

Yamazaki made his eleventh cup of coffee, and I started slurping my second bowl of ramen. "I understand, Satou. Let's talk. I'll tell you about my plan." Leaning forward, Yamazaki spoke conspiratorially. "Today's games are made on an incredibly large scale. A huge amount of data and precision programming are necessary, so novices like us can't do anything. Even making a game around the level of the outdated Super Nintendo would be a trial, at best. And even if you managed something like that, you still couldn't possibly call yourself a game creator."

"Then—"

Yamazaki quickly cut me off. "Just listen to me, all right? We have no budget, no friends in the industry, and nothing beyond the most limited resources. Even in our humble situation, there's still a way. Even without being able to write a decent program or prepare more than crappy music, as long as we have about fifty CG—or computer graphic—illustrations and one books worth of scenarios, there's a game genre that

should work for us.!"

Yamazaki's voice now was unmistakably suffused with passion.

"S-so what's the genre?" My own voice sounded hollow.

"As far as the programming goes, as long as we get a free-use game engine, we'll be fine. Let's just take the soundtrack off a copyright-free music CD, too. I'll draw the CG, Satou, and you write the scenarios."

Scenarios? Oh, that should be easy as long as I just had to write something appropriate. Like, say, "the hero has to rescue a princess who was kidnapped by villains."

"Okay," I said. "I'll write as many game scenarios as you want. What's the genre?"

"You'll do it, Satou?!" Yamazaki patted me on the shoulders.

"Yeah, let's do it, Yamazaki. Let's make a game together! So, like I was asking, what's the genre?"

"As long as the CG and scenarios are good, we can become totally famous. It might not even be that hard to become pros in the future. If we make some money with a self-published project, we even could start a company!"

"A company! That would be amazing, Yamazaki. You could be the president, and I'll be the vice president! What's the genre?"

"You'll do it, right, Satou?"

"Yeah, I'll do it."

"If we go this far, there's no turning back."

"How many times do I have to say it?"

"Well then, let's shake on it. Together, we can run toward tomorrow!" Yamazaki took my hand and grasped it firmly. "We're kindred spirits."

"Like I asked, what's the genre of the game?"

"We're friends!"

"What's the genre?"

"We're creators!"

"Like I keep asking, what the hell is the genre of the game?!"

Yamazaki finally proudly answered the question that I had asked repeatedly. "Erotic games."

Someone, please save me.

I shakily tried to return to my own room, but Yamazaki pulled me back.

"Here are the materials. Please, look through them as soon as you get a chance. If you play all these games, you should be able to understand the industry trends." Saying this, he handed me about thirty game boxes. These were the packages slathered with words like "torture," "wet," "abuse," "lewd," "tie," "academy," "confinement," "rape," '"savage," "pure love," "training," and "adventure."

I wanted to cry. But Yamazaki was grinning.

"These games aren't for sale to minors because they're erotic games. Well, these are really, really erotic games—but they're the only path open to us, so let's become erotic game creators. Let's get back at all the people in my class with our erotic games! Let's become billionaires with our erotic games! Let's become famous around the world for our erotic games! We'll go on to Hollywood with our erotic games! Let's get accepted into the Order of Culture with our erotic games.[17] Let's get a Nobel Prize for our erotic…"

His smile was ceaselessly bright, and any feeling that I could quit and run off had evaporated completely.

Chapter 05

A Humbert Humbert for The Twenty-First Century

Part One

"Take fireflies, for example. Try to imagine their beauty, the evanescent beauty of their lives, which don't even last a week.

"Female fireflies flash their lights only to have intercourse with the males; males twinkle just to have intercourse with the females. And once their mating has finished, they die. In short, their reproductive instinct is the single, absolute reason for fireflies to live. In that simple instinct and their simple world, no kind of sadness can intervene. This is precisely why fireflies are so fleetingly beautiful. Ah! Fireflies are the best!

"In contrast, please consider the human species this time. You'll find extremely complex society before you.

"I believe Freud stated something like 'Humans are creatures with

broken instincts.' Whenever I deal with any kind of frustration, rage, or sadness in life, I can't help but to remember those words.

"Modern concepts such as 'love' and 'romance' have made man, this creature with broken instincts, bury his original nature. It's all a lie, of course. To cover up the deception, mankind has to create still more entirely new concepts. This is why the world becomes increasingly complex with each new day.

"However, that complexity cannot hide the various contradictions born from our broken instincts. They create hopelessly fundamental oppositions: words and instinct, ideas and the physical self, reason and sexual desire. These opposing concepts are like two snakes biting at each other's tails. The two snakes constantly are locked in a fierce battle for superiority, so they turn and turn, causing us more and more pain.

"Do you understand? Do you get what I'm explaining? What? You don't understand the meaning at all? Well, that's okay.

"What I'm trying to say—"

I threw my pillow at Yamazaki. "Shut up! Die!"

Yamazaki, seated on top of the kotatsu, bent back his upper body to avoid the pillow and quietly continued his speech. "Because of our broken instincts, we are in pain. We continue in pain because our instincts have been twisted by reason. So, what are we supposed in do? Should we abandon knowledge? Throw away reason? In any event, that wouldn't be possible. For better or worse, we ate the fruit of knowledge long, long ago. This was written in that religious pamphlet 'Awaken!' that I got from that woman earlier."

"What?! What the hell are you thinking, waking me up at two o'clock in the morning, starting an unreasonably obscure speech and

drinking in my room?"

"Our reason and instinct are in opposition, but we can't get rid of either one. Given that, what are we meant to do? Compromise appropriately and start trying to date girls? Get married and try having kids? That is, after all, the conventional path. However, I discovered… women… those things just aren't human. Instead, they may, in fact, be closer to monsters. About a year ago, I realized the truth. While I was working at a convenience store to earn my tuition, all kinds of things happened. They're really terrible memories, and I don't want to think about them anymore." Having said all this in one breath, Yamazaki took a second beer from my fridge.

Before I could stop him, he opened the pull tab and guzzled it down in one swallow.

Suddenly, he screamed, "Women are crap! Screw women!"

Yamazaki's face was alarmingly red. He already seemed to be drunk. He gets drunk quickly yet keeps drinking all the time, anyway. I once wondered if he might not be a budding alcoholic; then, at some point, he explained, "My family home in Hokkaido was a wine factory. I've been drinking since I was in middle school. Don't worry about me—I'm totally fine!"

I wasn't sure which part of him was totally fine. Once Yamazaki got drunk, he wouldn't stop his tirades until he ran out of steam, even if you yelled or ignored him. I'd learned this the hard way.

I had no idea what to do with him.

Then he seemed to deflate; his shoulders dropped with his voice. "Women are crap. There are still times when I'd like to date a girl, though. I'm human, after all, and that can't be helped… Anyway, I had

another terrible experience. There was the cutest girl in my class. Her name was Nanako. At my school, where otaku girls from around the country gather, she alone had a decent-looking face. I don't even have to tell you that I'm rather good looking myself. My delicate body and attractive features got me picked on and teased by the girls in grade school—now, though, I figured that my good looks had to be advantageous.

"I said to Nanako 'Let's go out!' She replied, 'Sorry, Yamazaki, but you're kind of, you know… On top of that, I'm dating Kazuo.'

"What do you mean by 'you know'? What am I 'kind of'? And by Kazuo, you mean that greasy guy? I… I went out of my way to confess my feelings for you politely, so what's this all about?!"

Yamazaki waved both arms around, shouting, "Know your place, you bitch! I mean, you could at least let me do you! Don't screw around with me!"

I felt an intense wave of fear. It seemed I had stumbled upon another of his hidden facets. As if noticing my appalled expression, Yamazaki hurriedly gave me a big fake smile. "Ha! Ha ha ha! No, no, I'm just kidding. Just a joke! How could a guy like me have confessed anything to a girl? Real-life women are all crap, anyway. Ever since the time in middle school when I was almost raped by my big sister's friends, I gave up on them."

This was an even more shocking disclosure. Trying to appear composed, I continued smoking my cigarette. Meanwhile, Yamazaki's voice became increasingly loud. "Or something! That was all a lie. Everything I've said has been lies. Ha ha ha, I'm a little drunk, huh? Eh? What's wrong, Satou? Don't look at me like that. What's with those

expressions that seem to mix pity, derision, and fear? Don't… don't look at me. Don't look at me with those eyes!"

I had no idea in the least what I should do.

I guess Yamazaki basically was trying to say that women screw up men.

"Real women aren't decent at all. Being human is about our instinct for sex with women. Our reason naturally would reject women, yet our instinct really, really desires nothing more than sex with women. So, we're in trouble." This seemed to be the way his discussion was heading.

Why are you telling me this?! I wanted to yell at him. However, like a grown-up, I endured it.

Thinking about it, he really was an unfortunate person. Because of modern society's own warped nature, his mental state likewise had become thoroughly twisted.

Poor guy.

"No, don't feel sorry for me!"

"Calm down. Hey, here's an idea! Why not go to a brothel? If you do, maybe this confusion will be cleared away."

"Haven't I just been explaining this? How I don't even notice real women?

"What other kinds of women are there, besides real women?" The second I asked him this, he shifted and looked as though he were about to break into tears at any second. Then, his expression turned to pride.

Grinning slyly, he said, "They're right nearby, aren't they? You haven't realized yet? Satou, this week, you must have been overcome by their charms, too."

I was speechless.

'You realize now what I'm trying to say, don't you, Satou?"

I blinked.

"How lovable," he continued, "are the girls who live in the two-dimensional world. How wonderful are those girls inside my monitor."

All right, given his lengthy speech, I had to at least acknowledge Yamazaki's passion. "Okay, Yamazaki, erotic games have an amazing culture."

"As long as you understand, that's all that matters. Erotic games are the sole signpost guiding human reason to triumph over instinct. So long as we have erotic games, we don't need anything more to do with real women. Erotic games are our hope. So, Satou, have you just about finished your plan for the game?"

"J-just a little longer… Anyway, don't you think the games you lent me are sort of skewed?"

"Skewed how?"

"Well, you know… I mean, the characters in the games are a bit too young; like, the heroines all appear to be no more than elementary school children…"

"Ha! What are you saying now, Satou? This isn't like you. To start with, the heroines of erotic games are no more than fictional characters, drawn with two-dimensional computer graphics. In order to express innocence, purity, and femininity, there's no personification more appropriate than a little girl, is there? We're relaxed by the symbol of the little girl. And when they're 2D characters, they have no chance of dealing any blows to our fragile emotional state. On top of that, the motif becomes that of the weakest character possible in social, physical,

and emotional senses—the little girl. Because of that double safety lock, we are protected from being hurt, and we can escape the fear of being rejected. That is to say, this is the true meaning of moe: ideal, young, innocent femininity. Do you understand? You do understand, don't you?"

I mulled over his words… *I don't understand at all!* I tried to scream, but by that time, Yamazaki already had disappeared from my room.

On top of my kotatsu, he'd left a present: a single CD.

Part Two

I thought carefully about it the next morning. It sounded like Yamazaki had been dumped by a girl previously. In response, he'd gotten drunk in despair and had decided, "Screw real women—I have erotic games!" At least, that might explain what had happened.

However, if that were the whole story, he wouldn't have had to go out of his way to share his embarrassment with me. He hadn't needed to declare that he was this huge lolicon. He had hedged the confession with a rather incomprehensible theory; ultimately, though, he was still I lolicon who liked erotic games. He was dangerous. Or, at the very least, Yamazaki was more dangerous than I had ever imagined.

When I put the CD he had left the night before into my computer, I was horrified by the contents. This was no good; it was too dangerous. The 700MB CD-R had been stuffed with JPEG images. They were photographs—portraits of a girl who appeared to be in the latter years of

elementary school. Worse, she was completely naked. In short, they were nude photos.

Deliberately, I closed the curtains of my room. The recent child pornography laws made this CD way too dangerous. Although innocent, I could be thrown in jail, all because of Yamazaki. What the hell was he thinking? *Just constrain yourself to some CG, dammit!* I wanted to berate him, but he was at the Yoyogi Animation Institute.

On my fifteen inch computer display, the naked girl smiled perkily.

My chest hurt, and I couldn't breathe. Holding my head, I decided to explore the entirety of the CD, for the time being. As I did, I found a text file, which I opened in a text editor. It was a message from Yamazaki.

"Well, what do you think, Satou? You're pretty scared, aren't you? Remember, in order to make a high-quality erotic game, you need real-world references. Please, let these real-life images fill your imagination. This is Rika Nishimura's photo book. She's known as the greatest treasure of the lolicon world. Because they're all soft-core images, you can relax. Okay then, let's make a great erotic game using Rika's smile!"

That bastard! I trembled with rage. For one thing, when had I even agreed to make a Lolita-style erotic game? *Oh, come on, don't push your tastes onto me.*

Hm. It occurred to me when I considered it more carefully—maybe he was trying to convert me!?

It might have been different back in the time of Genji Hikari; in the modern age, however, society considers lolicons deviants to be destroyed. Thus, it must be extremely difficult to find others to share your interests. That must be why Yamazaki planned to make me his

partner in creating an erotic game, into one of his lolicon pals.

No, these suspicions of mine were, plainly put, nothing more than simple guesses, and he simply might be trying to make a high-quality erotic game. After all, in the current erotic game scene, games with little girl heroines were fairly common. In fact, it could even be said that Lolita-type characters directly symbolized this diseased media genre.

Now that I thought about it, another description for an erotic game was to call it a *bishoujo* game. Not a "beautiful woman" game but a "beautiful girl" game. I thought that some deep nexus of the problem was hidden around this point.

What will happen to Japan, where these bishoujo games are establishing a huge market? Pretending to consider this lofty social problem, I forced myself to stop worrying. Then, timidly, I loaded the Rika Nishimura photo collection onto my computer screen.

A few seconds passed.

I shuddered… Rika Nishimura was actually pretty cute.

"N-no, no! I'm just temporarily confused!" In my dim, six-mat, one-room apartment, my cry echoed emptily. And Rika smiled at me with that innocent smile, displaying her protruding ribs, her endlessly pliant body.

I gulped and clicked the mouse with trembling fingers. The next image was displayed on the monitor. *Oh, Rika…*

This is wrong! I raised my head and, with the entire force of my body, slammed it into the wall. It made a thumping sound. Tears fell from my eyes. It hurt. Yet Rika was still smiling… *Oh, Rika.*

No, no!

I hurriedly opened Internet Explorer. Right! The problem was

simply that Rika herself was too cute; that didn't mean I was a lolicon or anything. *I just happen to be affected by her beauty, but I'm still normal.* To prove it, I needed to find other Lolita images on the Internet. It was obvious that any Lolita images other than Rika's wouldn't excite me in the least.

However, thanks to the new child pornography laws, it was much more difficult to find Lolita images on the Internet than expected. I tried skimming the surface, but all I found were fraudulent sites using overseas telephone numbers.

But I'd be damned if anyone could doubt my net-surfing skills. I was a veteran, with four years of intensive connection to the Internet. To find valuable data, the best thing was to make the rounds on the message boards. These were the laws of the wired world. I decided to start with a 'bot-style search engine to scan the porno-image info message boards.

What was this? Several thousands of pages of results… Even after refining my search conditions, I still got several hundred hits. There were just too many.

For the moment, I tried opening the very first page. Instantly, with frightening energy, a seemingly endless number of browser windows opened on their own.

"Dammit! A trap!" I swore. It was one of those multiple-browser-opening attacks, using JavaScript, often found on pay pages. Even so, I didn't flinch. *Got it! It's too big a task for Internet Explorer.*

For a case like this, I needed to switch to a tab browser. Tab browsers: These excellent browsers allowed one to view multiple pages at once, in a single window. I downloaded Donut, the browser widely reputed to be most stable among the tab browsers, and opened in

immediately. *Oh! This makes browsing so easy!* At this rate, I would find the page I was looking for soon.

I opened as many simultaneous pages as my computer's resources would allow and searched them all. *Lolita images, Lolita images…* In new tabs, I opened all the pages linked to the message boards, then clicking on further links from the initial pages, and checking them all, top to bottom. I was looking for an underground-type porno message board.

Don't be tricked by pay pages! Beware of files with .exe extension! Suppress the annoying ads with pop-up blocker software!

The hands on my clock advanced; outside my window, it was already night. The blue-white glow of my monitor was the only light in my six-mat, one-room apartment. Even the time it would have taken to turn on the fluorescent lights would have been a waste. *My wondrous, Godlike typing speed blows through the wide-open Internet with wild intuition! Fear my light-speed mouse skills!*

I'm an untamed beast!

I'm a wolf!

Part Three

When I returned to reality, a week had passed. I liberated myself from the mouse and keyboard for the first time in several dozen hours and entered the bathroom. Reflected in the mirror was an unbelievably dangerous person—in short, me. The stubble from not shaving, my greasy hair, empty eyes, slack jaw… a dropout, unemployed hikikomori

who anyone would avoid, who no one would want to go near… a dirty, disheveled, stinking, nightmarish…

A lolicon stood there.

"Ugh." I weakly slid onto the bathroom floor.

How could things have come to this?

What had been done could never be undone. I had… I had collected Lolita images from all over the world. And I hadn't been satisfied with images alone. I had even gotten involved with video data, in formats like MPEG and RealMovie. My 30GB hard drive was full of the indecent bodies of little girls who, in truth, I pitied.

I can't go on. I just can't go on. A lolicon hikikomori is pretty much the worst thing ever. I'm less than human. I'm a monster. I can't keep living. I can never walk in the light of day again.

True, I certainly was a hikikomori. I was fairly certain that I wasn't a lolicon, though. My tastes were pretty conventional, and I had, in fact, even liked older women. Even so, now…

"Ahhh… hunh hunh!" Unbearable sobs poured forth, and my tears gushed onto the floor. They were tears of atonement. Yes, I acknowledged my mistakes, and I wanted to reform myself now. I wanted to change. But it was already too late.

As soon as I had started whispering things to myself like, "Nozomi is beautiful," I knew I was going to hell. As soon as I had begun to mutter thoughts like, "Kiyomi is amazing. Even for a first-year middle school student, she's amazing," to myself, I was ready to fall into hell. As soon as I had begun to opine, "Wow, Russians are hardcore, and Americans do terrible things, also," grinning to myself, I knew that there was a one hundred percent chance that I was going to hell.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I apologize, I didn't really want to do it. I didn't mean any harm. It was just a joke at the start. But now…

"Argh!" It hurt. I was in pain. My chest hurt. My heart was breaking with guilt. I didn't want to be a lolicon or anything of the sort. But now, nonetheless, I was a first-rate lolicon hikikomori, the most worthless piece of human garbage who ever lived.

Still, listen: You're wrong. You're making a mistake! I don't want to lock up a girl in my room or anything like that! I don't want to kidnap anyone! You're wrong. I'm not the one who committed that crime! Please, believe me! Trust me! Don't look at me like that! Don't look at me!

But… red schoolbags. And recorders. And innocent girls playing in the park. Gah!

"You want to play with big brother?"

"I'll give you candy."

"Just lift up your skirt."

"Let's play doctor."

"Here's your shot!"

I'm done for, done for, done for! I should die, die, die, right away. What's that noise? Shut up…

"Satou! You're here, aren't you? Please, open up!" From somewhere far away, someone was calling out, "Satou! Are you alive? Are you dead? If you're alive, please open the door!"

Someone was pounding on my apartment door. I didn't have the capacity to show myself in public anymore, though. *Leave me alone…*

"What, are you really not there? I just wanted to lend you this marvelous illegal video."

Standing up, I wiped away my tears and opened the door.

Hearing my story, Yamazaki crumpled his face into a frown of pure

disgust. "You locked yourself up for a whole week and just collected porn? You're a failure as a human being."

"First off, this is all your fault."

"You say that, but I guess it's your nature, after all. Right, Satou?"

"D-d-don't you feel guilty, dragging me into this, and then saying that?"

"I told you those were just character references, right? Look, Satou, you're not normal at all if you've collected thirty gigs of porn. I don't even want to come close to you. Don't come near me—you're freaking me out!"

"G-gr-grrrr!" As a result of intense rage, I literally saw red. Both of my fists trembled.

"W-well, to change the mood, let's start talking seriously about our plan for making the game. I'll lend you this tape, okay?"

Snatching the tape from his hands, I smashed it against my leg and broke it in two. "Wh-wh-what are you…?" Yamazaki stuttered.

At that moment, I saw my only escape from the lolicon world.

I glared at Yamazaki. "Yamazaki."

"What? Please, pay me back for the video."

"Lolicon material is inhuman; it's monstrous."

He was silent.

"Let's escape, let's escape together! If we don't get away right now, we'll be lolicons until we die! Hurry!" Forcefully grabbing Yamazaki's hand, I pulled him out of the room.

Stopping by Yamazaki's room for his digital camera, we headed outside,

walking quickly through the town.

It was an early May afternoon. Although it was warm in town, there were few people outside.

"Where are we going?"

Without answering, I kept trudging forward.

On the way, I ducked into a convenience store and bought a disposable camera, which I gave to Yamazaki. I then continued to hurry toward my destination, Yamazaki in tow.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The best time possible.

"A digital camera and a disposable camera? What in the world do you want me to use this for?" Yamazaki asked, out of breath.

When I reached my destination, I answered, "Take a picture of me."

"Why?"

"Well, do you know where we are?"

"Hm. This looks like the front gate of an elementary school."

"Right, the Ikuta Elementary School, a public elementary school with about five hundred students. And I'm going to hide in the shrubs in front of the gate. Yamazaki, you hide, too. Hurry up!"

"Huh?"

"The end-of-the-day bell will ring soon. When that happens, the students will come pouring out of this gate."

"That's true. So?"

"I'm going to take pictures."

"O-of what?"

"Of elementary school students."

He didn't say anything.

"I'm going to take some great pictures of beautiful little girls, using

your state-of-the-art digital camera."

Silence.

"You understand, Yamazaki? I'm going to sneak some pictures soon. I'll hide and take pictures of little girls in the spring. I might even 'accidentally' take some panty shots. It'll be fine. If we stay still and hide in these bushes, no one will find us. I'm going to photograph these elementary school students. I'll take as many pictures as I can—only of the cutest girls, of course."

The bell rang. In a few minutes, the students would come through this gate.

"Yamazaki, you take pictures of me with that disposable camera. Take as many pictures as you can of ugly me, the filthy lolicon guy, while he's taking pictures of elementary school kids! You understand? This is the only way we can escape from lolicon! You see that, right? You understand? It's an ugly picture. However, at the same time, this is your appearance, too. You need to burn this disgusting, pathetic, dirty appearance onto that film. We'll develop it together and objectively look at our own ugliness, dirtiness, and unsightliness. And then, we'll be able to escape from lolicon and return to normal."

The voices of the little girls echoed out from the entrance to the stairs. I readied the digital camera. *Only a little more…*

"Ready, Yamazaki?! I'm going to take the pictures. In just a moment, the first girls will arrive. I'll secretly take their pictures! Then, you take my picture! You get it? If you understand, answer me, Yamazaki.

"Oh, the first one is beautiful! In a white dress, black tights, and dark brown boots, she's amazing! Moe, moe! Are you listening, Yamazaki?! I'm clicking the shutter! Now, you click the shutter, too. Don't use the

flash, though—if you do, they'll find us and call the police right away.

"Ah, this thrill, this blood-boiling, flesh-crawling thrill. I'm excited! My heart is pounding! Elementary school students nowadays are so cute. I'm clicking the shutter! Click! Click! Nice shot!

"Let's call that wonderful elementary school student—she looks to be about a sixth-grade girl—let's call her Sakura, for now. The second that Sakura turned back around to meet her friends, I couldn't let that perfect diagonal, forty-five degree angle get away from me! Heh heh heh, are you listening, Yamazaki? Are you making sure to get photos of me, Yamazaki? Capture every last detail of my hideous lolicon appearance, or else I'll just be a normal pervert.

"Whoa! More and more students are pouring out of the building. Look at those pretty girls, so full of life. I'm taking their pictures, taking their pictures, taking their pictures! Blow, spring breeze! Rise up, sudden wind! And lift up their skirts!

"Are you still there, Yamazaki? I'm looking into the digital camera's finder, so I can't tell if you're there or not. You're standing diagonally behind me, aren't you, Yamazaki? Be sure to photograph my distasteful appearance. You understand, don't you? Come on, Yamazaki, are you really listening? Hey, say something! I'm doing my best to get a panty shot of these little kids. You should be infected by my enthusiasm and doing your best, too. Are you listening? Hey, I said to say something! Oh well, whatever. We are committing a crime, after all. If you're too scared to talk, that's only natural. You have a soft voice, anyway.

"Hey, what do you know? Taking secret pictures is fun. And I am ugly now… Hm, that's right—I didn't really want to become this sort of scum. When I was little, my dream was to go to Tokyo University and

become a great scholar. I wanted to invent something that would help all mankind. And now, I'm a lolicon hikikomori! You should cry. Yeah, that's right. Cry! Shed tears for my repulsive appearance!

"We wanted to smile casually and happily each day; we wanted to enjoy a normal, average, invigorating daily life. The incomprehensibly rough waves of fate have made it impossible, though—so, cry in despair! We really wanted to be useful to everyone, to be respected by everyone, to live in harmony with everyone. Now, though, we're lolicon hikikomori—so, cry in despair! You must cry!

"Oh, I'm sad. I'm so sad. But the elementary school kids are cute. I'm excited.

"Ah. Ooh. My tears won't stop. The finder is fogging up, so I can't see too well. But I'll keep taking pictures of these little girls—so, Yamazaki, you need to work hard to keep taking pictures, too. It's sad, but let's try hard. We can't stop crying, but let's do all we can. We'll do our best to photograph the elementary school kids!

"Huh? What? Why are you suddenly tapping my shoulder? Is something wrong? Hey, hey, cut it out. We're just getting to the good part.

"See? Look at that one, the short-haired girl wearing knee socks. She's so cute; I want to take her home. Put her under my arm like take-out and carry her home. Eh? What a pain in the ass you are. I'm busy right now! Come on, what's wrong with you, Yamazaki. If you tap me like that, the picture will blur. Hey, hey, you're really annoying me. What happened to you, all of a sudden?"

"Satou! I said, Satou!"

"Shhh! Quiet, or we're going to get caught!"

"What are you doing in a place like this, Satou?"

"It should be obvious. That short-haired girl…"

"The girl?"

"Taking secret pict—"

At that moment, I just happened to take my eyes off the finder. As I did, the palm resting on my shoulder entered the corner of my vision. Those slender, pliable fingers couldn't possibly belong to a man…

I turned around.

Misaki was there. My heart started pumping at fifty times my normal pulse rate.

A gentle breeze was blowing.

Time stopped.

Somewhere along the way, Yamazaki had disappeared, only to be replaced by Misaki.

To make things worse, Misaki was decked out in her religious outfit—the plain, long-sleeved dress and white parasol. Dressed like that she was crouched down in the bushes with me.

"Wh-wh-when did you get here?"

"Just a few seconds ago."

I thought about asking how much of my frenzied prartle she had heard, but I gave up. Either way, this was a huge crisis.

A shady man, digital camera hung around his neck, hiding in the shadows near the gate of an elementary school. Anyone would take him for a pervert—and rightfully so. I was already out of options. *Gah! I'm*

sorry, Mother and Father. I wasn't content with dropping out of college. I needed to be thrown in jail for sex crimes, also. I'm a complete failure as a son. How can I atone for this crime?

I was already out of time. Misaki, who kept looking into my face, would start screaming soon. "There's a pervert here! Someone, come quick!"

No, no. No doubt, it wouldn't end with that. After all, she was dressed in her religious clothes. And religions have strict commandments like, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Naturally, lusting after a child would be beyond the pale—which is exactly why God's rage rains down on lolicon men.

That's right. Misaki likely would threaten me with something like, "The Lord knows all your sins!"[18] She would say, "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things.!"[19] and set me shivering with fear. Saying, "For the wages of sin is death,"[20] she likely would try to throw me into the hellfire of God's rage!

This was the absolute end. Looking up at the sky, I prepared for the moment that God's punishment would descend upon me. In that moment, my life would come to a close. My future would be sealed. It was just a second away.

Time passed while I waited, though, and Misaki didn't denounce me. Looking back down at Misaki, she was still gazing at me. Our bodies hidden in the bushes, we stared at each other silently.

Finally, Misaki explained, "I just saw Yamazaki, face covered with both hands, run off in the direction of your apartment. I wondered what was going on; and when I peeked in here, I saw you, Satou, so…"

"You know Yamazaki?"

"The man in room 202, right? He looked pretty happy to get 'Awaken!' from us. That's unusual."

"He did? What a strange guy."

"Am I bothering you? You did look pretty busy, after all, Satou."

"N-no! Not at all. I mean, not really. By the way, Misaki, what were you doing in this area?" I tried to change the subject. I was beginning to feel as though I might actually get away with the whole thing.

"I'm on my way home from our religious recruiting. Auntie Kazuko and I were just passing by here. I had Auntie go on home ahead of me when I found out you were here."

"Yeah? By the way, I really like your religious outfit. The parasol really gives off a spiritual aura."

When I said that, Misaki cast her eyes downward. "This is a disguise." Her face turned pink as she spoke.

"Huh?"

"I really hate doing this religious solicitation stuff, so I go out of my way to carry a parasol. That way, no one will remember my face." Her reason was strangely reassuring. After everything, she remained mysterious. I still couldn't tell who she really was.

This was my chance to escape. *Run away now!*

"Well then, I've got to be going." I stood up.

Misaki also stood, closing her parasol.

Just like that, I started walking away awkwardly. I made it to the sidewalk from behind the bushes, and then I briskly headed up the path toward my apartment.

"Satou?"

"What?" I asked without turning around or slowing down.

"So, you're actually a lolicon?"

I felt as though my heart would stop. Pretending I hadn't heard, I walked even faster.

Misaki continued, "It's fine if you are a lolicon. In fact, it might even be more convenient for you. If you say you're a lolicon hikikomori, it'd be the absolute best. You'd be at the very lowest rank of human society, after all."

I stopped walking and turned around.

Misaki wore her habitual smile. "Yeah. Thinking about it, lolicon is better. That way, I think you're even more perfect for my project." She jumped lightly, excited. It seemed, once again, to be somewhat forced.

In the calmest voice I could possibly manage, I stated, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Anyway, I'm not a lolicon hikikomori, you know. I'm a creator! I was just taking reference pictures."

"Hm…"

"It's true."

"Well, let's meet again. Don't do anything that would put you on the news, okay?" With that, Misaki marched away.

It was a May afternoon.

Chapter 06

Fond Memories, Followed by an Oath

Part One

The second Golden Week[21] had arrived, I recognized that the rainy season had ended in a flash.[22] The days passed and passed and passed at an amazing speed.

However, over the course of a month, all sorts of events had occurred.

For example, one night recently, I happened to run into Misaki at the convenience store. She handed me a piece of printer paper. It appeared to be a contract. "Contract" was written on the paper in black ballpoint pen.

Just a week before that, I'd made plans to meet the girl I'd known my high school literary club. We went to a café in Shibuya and had a little

chat. I was a bit nervous, but nothing of note happened.

On top of that, my father was laid off during a "restructuring." My allowance would stop the following month.

Likewise, my next door neighbor, Yamazaki, also seemed to be facing all sorts of unexpected hardships recently. "My father, who works in the primary sector, has been hospitalized with liver trouble," he explained. "I'm the eldest son. Should I take over the family business?"

In reality, it seemed like he had no choice. I thought his best decision would be to go home right away and run his family's dairy farm and winery. Apparently, he had some deep issues with his parents.

"Even though they have money, they wouldn't help me continue my education. They sent an application to a dairy school without even asking me. And so I worked part time for a year at convenience stores and as a security guard to earn my tuition for Yoyogi Animation Institute. They've got to be kidding, coming to me with this now!"

I didn't really understand Yamazaki's anger, but becoming furious allowed him to put off thinking about these problems. He acted as though he would simply not commit to anything, even if everything caved in around him. I decided to follow his example and just avoid reality for the time being.

Speaking of avoiding reality, there was still the issue of the erotic game we'd been planning. We were trying to push forward, even now, at a time when our project was almost utterly meaningless.

Truthfully, I should escape from my hikikomori life as quickly as possible and focus on trying to get a legitimate job; but for some reason, I put on a smile and told Yamazaki, "I'd like you to just leave me alone about the Lolita stuff, okay?"

"Sure. We can work with your tastes, Satou. I honestly though we would be arrested at our little elementary school picture-taking event the other day."

I don't care about anything like that; I have to find a job now or I'm finished! I wanted to scream, but once again, I smiled and went along with him. "I'll write the scenarios today."

"I'm counting on you. The quality of the game all depends on your scenarios, Satou."

"I know. I'll do my best when writing them. I'll put all my energy into making this erotic game!"

Yeah, this is the peak. Bravo! Or rather, that's awful!

Nothing is better suited for escaping from reality than making an erotic game. After all, the genre itself aspires toward limitless escapism.

Yamazaki, seated at his two huge computer towers, started another speech. "That's right. Escapism is the very essence of the erotic game. As creators, we have to offer the player an enjoyable escape from reality. The real world is overflowing with painful things: girls who make asses out of guys like us, girls who make fun of guys like us, that bitch who cheated on me with the manager of the convenience store, the community college student who toyed with my adolescence… all those painful things make this world a difficult place."

The second half of his speech had described pretty concrete situations specific only to him, but I let him continue. Pausing briefly drink his oolong tea, Yamazaki raised his voice even higher, intoning, "In

short, real women are worthless. They are incredibly close to monster. And so…"

"So?"

"So, as erotic game creators, we have to create perfectly convenient female characters, the kind that don't exist in reality."

Convenient female characters…

"I mean, characters who start liking the protagonist without any real reason, ones who get close to the protagonist out of pure good will, those kinds of characters," Yamazaki explained. "Characters without any hidden motives whatsoever, who would absolutely never betray the protagonist. The kinds of characters who could never exist in the real world."

"If you introduce characters so far removed from actual life, won't the overall realism of the game be compromised?"

"It doesn't matter. Players aren't looking for realism in erotic game. Even if we stupidly tried to introduce realism, players would just sick of it, eventually. If someone wanted to fall in love with a realistic character, they could go speak to a real woman and not have to play erotic games."

"I see."

"There are still techniques you should use to create characters," he warned.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you just stick in a regular female character and announce 'she is a perfectly ideal heroine!' there's no ring of truth to that claim. You have to use strategies in terms of situational and character-based set ups to reinforce the fact that your 'ideal heroine' is, indeed ideal.

"For example, one technique is to make her a childhood friend. If

you make the main character's childhood friend into a heroine, you can develop a believable bond, because they've been close to each other from youth. From this fantasy, you get a convincing argument for her as a perfectly convenient, ideal heroine.

"The second technique is to make her a maid. If you make a maid your heroine, then, due to the nature of her job, a master-servant relationship develops. From this fantasy, you again get a convincing argument for her as a perfectly convenient, ideal heroine.

"Finally, the third technique is to make her a robot. You make a robot into the heroine. Because robots cannot oppose humans, the sense that she cannot have ulterior motives or that she cannot betray owner, making a convincing argument for her as a perfectly convenient, ideal—"

"B-by robots, you mean…?" I interrupted.

"I mean a regular robot. You make a robot the heroine of your erotic game." It was a fairly surreal conversation, but Yamazaki's expression suggested that this was all completely natural.

"In short, the main goal when creating erotic game characters is to set up a reason why the heroine cannot defy the main character. You do this when you define the initial situation. She must obey any order from the main character, she must listen, and she must love the main character unconditionally. These techniques can help you fulfill these requirements as much as possible."

I thought it was best not to think too deeply about this.

In utter desperation, I asked, "Well, what about a classmate who is both a childhood friend and a robot maid?"

"That's a great set up!" Yamazaki answered, a sincere look on his face.

"Well, how about the additional scenario that she was the main character's lover in her previous life?"

"Th-that's amazing!"

"On top of that, she's sickly and blind and can't speak, either. The only person she can rely on is the main character. How about that?"

"That's absolutely perfect, isn't it?!"

"Also, she's got Alzheimer's."

"Good choice!"

"Not to mention suffering from multiple personality disorder!"

"Perfect!"

"She's actually an alien."

"Great!"

This discussion continued for several hours; as a result, we finally decided on the set up for the heroine of the erotic game I was to write.

"She's the protagonist's childhood friend as well as a robot maid. She's blind, deaf, and sickly; on top of that, she's an alien with Alzheimer's and multiple personality disorder. However, she's actually a ghost with a connection to the main character from their past lives. And her true form is really a fox spirit."

"Wow, amazing! It's perfect! It's moe moe!"

"Hm…"

"What is it, Satou? You can start writing the scenario right away."

"Uh… Uh…"

"Uh?"

"How the hell can I write something like this? I'll do it my own way!" I kicked Yamazaki and went back to my own room.

It was already two o'clock in the morning.

What the hell has happened to us? I tried worrying about this, but in the end, we were just two no-good hikikomori types, after all. I decided to continue my escape from reality.

That's right! Speaking of escapism, the best thing would be to create an erotic game.

That's why I'd write the scenario right away!

Part Two

Several days passed quickly.

"A journey through love and youth made by soldiers taking a stand against a giant, evil organization…" This was the story that I scribbled, as it seemed apropos. In the beginning, it went surprisingly well. The words came fluidly. I was struck by my own literary talent.

Unfortunately, I had encountered a large problem already: The story I was writing was supposed to be an erotic game scenario—and as an erotic game scenario, it needed erotic scenes. In short, to write erotic story, I had to fully describe lewd scenes. I had to write love scenes thoroughly. It was painful. It was tragic that I, at twenty-two years of age, had to write a wanna-be erotic story. It was too painful.

I had been locked up in my room for three days.

My work was becoming extremely difficult. My scenarios weren't even moving along at a line an hour. *The vocabulary… I have no vocabulary*. My brain simply wasn't equipped with the particular metamorphs used in erotic fiction. I had no idea what to do. It took

forever just to choose a single word.

More than anything, it was mortifying. What in the world was I thinking, writing such embarrassing sentences? There's a limit even to escapism. I'd blush, sitting alone in my dark room. My heart would race, I'd break into a cold sweat, my fingers would stop on the keyboard as I typed… I couldn't take it any longer. I didn't want to write erotic scenarios.

Man, I was sick of it. Really, truly sick of it.

I screwed up all my courage, though, and built sentences with the entire focus of my being because I feared that the second I stopped writing the erotic game, the real problems I desperately was trying to ignore would come back in full force. I would have to look straight at the painful truth, and that would be no good. It would, in fact, be bad.

That's why I used the France Shoin[23] books I had bought as examples as I focused on writing the scenarios. *Look for the right vocabulary! Find the metaphor!* It was a tiring ordeal. I'd write and delete… Write and delete. My brain was about to unhinge.

"The man unzips his pants and drops his jeans to his knees."

"Ah, ah, oh no!"

"Sister, sister, sister!"

"And her soft breasts…"

"… beating off…"

No good. Delete.

"Swollen."

No. Delete.

"It rose high in a manly way."

Wrong! Delete, delete!

'Piercing the sky."

Are you kidding?! Delete, delete, delete!

"Soaking wet."

Wrong!

"Salmon pink."

I said, 'wrong!'

"Shining wetly."

No!

"Stuck wetly to the lower abdomen."

Stop it!

"Slimy."

No more!

"Heartbeat."

I can't take any more!

"The labia."

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Shell pink."

I said, 'what's wrong with me?'

"Milky white."

What's wrong with me…?

"Small breasts…"

"…fresh and young…"

"…sweating…"

"…harder…"

"N-no!"

"…sweet sigh…"

"…rubbing up against her…"

"…slightly pointed…"

Other words came to me: "grope"… "undulation"… "insertion"… "hips"… "from her lis"… "grinding"… "sweet"… "like a kitten"… "female body"… "tensed"…

What's wrong with me…?

"Swollen"… "to the crotch"… "cute"… "urgent"… "hardened"… "light pink"… "want to see"… "okay, it's fine"… "completely naked"… "nothing left covering her"… "an oval-shaped stain"… "mound"… "slit"…

No more.

"Right below the belly button"… "the private parts"… "make your chest pound"…

I'm done for.

"Swollen"… "breathing quietly"… "simple"… "the bush"… "overflowing honey"… "with her pointer finger"… "it's almost like you wet yourself"… "impatiently"… "indecent"… "of the membrane"…

What about my life…?

"Swollen"… "piston"… "vulgar"… "crack"…

I can't see my future.

"Swollen"… "sticky sound"… "wet"… "hot"… "mire"… "plunge in"… "foreskin"… "soft flesh"… "blushing just a little"… "licentious"…

It's better if I just die.

"Swollen"… "swollen"… "piercing the sky"… "rising high."

"Swollen"… "swollen"… "swollen"… "swollen"… "swollen!"

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

I scratched my head.

Delete all, delete all, delete all…

Using a France Shoin book as a model was a mistake from the start. When fiction becomes the reference for fiction, it's natural that the descriptions get stranger and stranger. I felt like I was going crazy.

I'm okay. Calm down.

Taking a deep breath to soothe myself, I decided to start over from the beginning, using my own real experiences for reference. If I did that, I should be able to draw realistic erotic scenes based on my own nonfiction experiences.

Real experiences, real experiences…

When it came to real-life experiences I could use in an erotic game; I had no choice but to think far back into the past. I needed to remember that distant time, five years earlier… that fun time from five years ago… my high school years.

I closed my eyes and thought back. Doing so, I soon realized that those memories would move in an emotionally difficult direction. I hurriedly opened my eyes and tried to stop thinking about it. However, the vector of my thoughts, once given a direction, could no longer be stopped.

My bright, optimistic high school years… my refreshing youth.

"High school" suggests slightly bitter romances, and society generally agrees with this conventional wisdom. I, too, had been in a romance; every day had been filled with excitement, like in a love simulation game. For example, I had liked that older girl in my literary club.

As might be expected from someone in the literary club, she was

quite an avid reader. Because of that, she was a huge idiot. She once read *The Complete Manual of Suicide* in front of me.

I had thought, *You should stop because that kind of behavior is unbecoming. You're cute, so why can't you just act normally?*

The girl hadn't shown any sign of noticing at all.

"Why are you reading that book?" I asked her, feeling I had no choice.

Laughing self-consciously, she answered, "Don't you think that suicide seems kind of cool?" At the time, she'd just had a terrible breakup with her boyfriend, and she seemed depressed over it.

"Hey, Satou. What do you think of people who commit suicide?" She'd asked me.

"I guess it's all right, isn't it? If people want to commit suicide, I guess they ought to be free to do so. It's probably not right for others to judge."

"Hm." She didn't seem impressed by my boring answer; as though deflated, she dropped her eyes once more to the book on her lap.

After school, on another day, just when I had gotten sick of playing: cards with her, she said, "Hey."

"What?"

"Satou, after all this time, if I died or something would you be sad?" No matter how I've tried, I cannot remember how I answered that sudden question. All I remember clearly is that several days later she came to school with white bandages wrapped around her slender wrists.

Come on, give me a break. I have no idea how serious you were about wanting to die, but you should at least be a little embarrassed by melodrama.

"You're not just a stupid middle school girl."

She replied, "Because I'm a stupid high school girl."

She was the kind of girl who openly said this sort of thing though she wanted to go to the highly competitive Waseda University. Proudly, she'd drop non sequiturs like, "By the way, our problem is that there are no villains anywhere."

She continued her explanation. "Nobody is to blame. Not Mizuguchi from the basketball team, or me, or you, Satou—none of us is to blame. For some reason, all sorts of things seem to be heading in a bad direction. It's strange."

"The only strange thing is your mind."

"Don't say such a cold thing to a girl who just got out of the emergency room. By the way, Satou, did you notice that even though none of it's our fault, a lot of casually painful things happen all around us? It's because a huge organization is planning a terrible conspiracy against us."

"Yeah, yeah."

"It's true. A little bird told me."

"Yeah, yeah." She was the kind of girl who liked to pretend she was crazy. Despite that—and because she was beautiful—I liked her. A few days before graduation, she even let me do her once.

It moved me deeply to think that the payoff for having kept on her good side over two whole years was that one single act. It was randomly exciting, yet it was also sad. In the end, I was able to do it just that once.

I felt like I should have done it a few more times. But then, I also felt it might have been better for me not to have done it even that one time. I wondered which would have been right.

Ahhh…

At a trendy café in Shibuya, I asked her, "Well, what do you think?"

It was the first time I'd seen her in several years.

The previous Sunday, without any warning whatsoever, I had gotten a phone call. "Let's get together," she'd said.

I left the house without worrying about it.

We were to meet in front of the Moai Statue. It was a bit touristy, but as we were from another town, there wasn't any real problem. As soon as we greeted each other, the girl said, "I called your family home, Satou, to try and get your current contact information, but your mom mistook me for a salesman and was suspicious of me."

"Oh yeah, that happens a lot. Those solicitors pretend to be a classmate when they're trying to collect a register of names…" It was kind of depressing that after not seeing each other for several years, this was our first discussion.

My memories hadn't deceived me: She really was cute, after all. And so, I was a bit nervous. In addition, I suffered from the fear of eye contact and agoraphobia—neuroses peculiar to hikikomori. Even after entering the café, I couldn't stop sweating.

Seated against the window, the girl stirred her ice coffee with a straw. "Satou, what are you doing now?"

I answered truthfully, without hiding anything. I had a smile on face.

She laughed. "I predicted that you might end up like this."

"Oh, I've currently been shut in for four years," I bragged. "I'm a professional hikikomori!"

"Even now, you have trouble going outside?"

I nodded.

"Well then, I have something that'll be good for you."

The girl withdrew what looked to be a pill box from her small bag

and handed me some capsules. "This is Ritalin."

"What's that?"

"It's a drug that's kind of related to stimulants. It really, really works. With this, you can be full of energy whenever you want!"

She was still a strange person, even after all this time. Evidently, she was seeing about three psychiatrists. Even so, her thoughtfulness pleased me, so I took one of the questionable pills gratefully.

After that, I became energetic. In fact, we exchanged an unnecessarily upbeat conversation.

"You were so normal during our high school years, Satou… Well, no, I guess not."

"And what are you doing now?"

"I'm unemployed."

"You graduated from college, right?"

"I did, but now I'm unemployed. I'll become a housewife soon, though."

"Hm, you're getting married?" *A young wife of twenty-four. Moe moe…*

"You're surprised?"

"In a way."

"You're sad?"

"Not at all."

"Why not?"

"Why do you think?"

We left the café. The girl skipped around me, laughing brightly.

Then, she said, "I'm really happy right now."

She boasted that she was marrying a hard-working, national government employee who was rich and, at the same time, good looking.

Basically, she was marrying the best person possible!

"Don't think too hard about this. Don't think about anything too complicated. I'm happy." Her tone was upbeat; it seemed that she, also, had been helping herself to that drug.

As we passed through crowds of people, she asked, "Back then; I should have gone out with you. You really liked me, didn't you, Satou?"

"I really just wanted someone to let me do her."

"I'm really sorry. Maybe we shouldn't have spent all that time playing cards every day."

"The fact that the one time we did it, we parted soon afterward… that was rather hard on me."

"Maybe it's my fault that you became a hikikomori."

"There's no connection at all. It was more like some other big kind of…"

"Like the huge organization?"

"Yeah, that's right! The giant, evil organization totally got me."

"Me, too, you know? The evil organization ripped me off, too! There might be nothing I can do…"

Suddenly, she announced that she was pregnant.

"Wow! I'm so amazed! You're going to be a mother!" I was stunned.

"That's why I'm getting married. Now, I've succeeded at life! I've gotten on the right path. Now, I think I can go forward, all the way, in a straight line." She was walking quickly, about three feet in front of me. I couldn't see her expression, but I assumed from her tone that she was honestly excited. She was happy. She had to be.

"That's really great. Really great. Really great." I said the same thing three times in a row to celebrate the start of her new life with

appropriate ceremony.

"It doesn't bother you, Satou?" Her steps ceased.

"No, not really." I stopped in place, as well.

"I don't know why, but I'm in pain."

We had arrived at a street lined with hotels. There were several couples hanging around who had their arms around each other's shoulders, even though it was the middle of the day. I felt a little shiver of excitement.

"Shall we have an affair or something?" The girl smiled as she said this.

"An affair with a young wife! It's like on TV!" I grew even more excited.

"I only let you do it once, so I feel bad for you."

We stood in front of a hotel, directly facing each other. I really wanted to stay there with her.

We were both laughing. "You're happy now, aren't you?" I asked.

"That's right."

"You're in a place where the giant organization can no longer reach you, right?"

"That's right," she repeated.

"Then, I'm going home." Hunching over, I left the spot immediately.

As I passed her, I stole a quick look. She was crying. It seemed impossible. It should have been easy for someone as cute and friendly is she was to find a happy, healthy, and gentle life—something that anyone would envy. Someone that beautiful should be able to live a carefree life.

In actuality, there's nothing to do about a useless, recurring depression. A person could become disconsolate or angry. Even if

they're enraged enough to punch something, they won't find a target. A huge organization… They wish that some huge, evil organization existed. That becomes our dream…

Terrible things inundate the world. This world is wrapped in complex, messed-up, senseless, and incomprehensible misfortune and sadness.

She told me that her college friend had committed suicide, leaving behind a stupid will that said something like, "I've been broken by both dreams and love, and so I shall die now." A classmate from elementary school had married and divorced. Yamada was now raising two children on his own and going gray, which made her laugh. Kazumi, who had been living with a man, went home to her family. Yuusuke, who was trying to become a public servant, failed his test. Yamazaki, who was making erotic games, had all his dreams destroyed.

"I'm testing my own talent. It doesn't have to be an erotic game, but I'll do… I'll do something!" When he proclaimed this, drunk from sake, his future already was set as a dairy farmer, chasing after cows. I no longer could see how he could escape it.

At reunions and parties, everyone laughed and made a big fuss. Those events were fun, as was karaoke. Everyone had a good time and seemed sure that the future would be perfect: We could become anything! We could do anything! We could become happy!

These things were true—but steadily, very steadily, at a speed so terribly slow we didn't even notice it, we were being run down. There was nothing we could do, even if we were in trouble, defeated, of crying. Every one of us eventually had some terrible experiences. The only difference was whether it would happen sooner or later; but in the end,

we all would fall into some really unbearable situation.

I was scared. I was scared of all sorts of things.

I thought of my female classmate. *Hey, I'm no good. I'm more than five hundred times worse than the public servant you managed to meet.*

There's nothing I can do for you. I really wanted to go to the hotel with you, but it would have just made it harder for you. I wasn't just trying to be cool or anything. Ah, I really did want to have an affair with you. It's impossible, though. It's obviously impossible. A pathetic hikikomori like me, who can't even take care of himself, doesn't have the power to make you happy.

Oh, I wanted to become a strong person, a person who could for relied upon, who brightened surroundings just by being there. I wanted to spread good fortune. However, the reality is that I am a hikikomori—a hikikomori, afraid of the outside world.

I don't know why I'm so frightened, so frightened that I can't do anything.

I'm no good anymore.

Next month, my allowance would stop. What would I do then? This lifestyle would have to end soon. Should I just end my life?

I shut down the computer I was using to write the erotic game scenarios. I decided to call Yamazaki and apologize. "I'm sorry, I can't write the scenarios anymore."

But he was already on the phone. I could hear his screams of rage from next door. "Why does it always have to come back to this discussion?! To start with, I came here with my own money. I'm not under any obligation to take orders from you!"

It sounded like he was fighting with his parents again. Everyone has their own problems.

I was just about at the point of truly losing the courage to go on. A line from a poem popped into my head: The end of the rainy season, refreshing, suicide.

I shook my head. For now, I decided to sleep. Changing into my pajamas, I tried lying down in bed. As I did, the scrap or paper on top of the TV caught my eye. It was the contract I had received from Misaki.

One evening, I had been reading manga in the convenience store's magazine corner when, all of a sudden, Misaki was standing behind me. "By the next time we meet, make sure to sign and stamp this, okay?" she said, extracting a piece of paper from her bag. She passed it to me; by the look of it, she'd been walking around with it for a while.

That scrap of paper…

I'd already read it several times, but I picked it up and read again. It was, of course, an unendingly incomprehensible document, so utterly ridiculous that it made my head ache. However, with my emotions at their lowest, it also appealed to me in some strange way. So, I finally signed and stamped the contract.

Shoving it into my pocket, I headed toward the neighborhood park. It was night, and the moon was out. Somewhere, a dog howled. Seated on the bench next to the swings, I looked dreamily up at the night sky.

Unexpectedly, Misaki showed up, again wearing normal clothing rather than her religious garb. She joined me on the park bench and began making excuses for something I hadn't even mentioned. "This doesn't mean I watch the park entrance from my window every night."

I laughed. After my laugh had evaporated, the distant baying of the

dog had ceased, and the only sound left was an ambulance's far-off siren, Misaki asked, "Did you finish making your game?"

"Ah, yeah, the erotic game got canceled in the end. How did you know about it, though?"

"When Yamazaki came to the manga café a few days ago, I happened to overhear him talking about it. By the way, what's an erotic game?"

"It's a code for EROA and GARIOA.[24] EROA stands for Economic Rehabilitation in Occupied Areas, and GARIOA is Government Appropriation for Relief in Occupied Areas. They were developed by the American government to prevent social problems, such as disease and famine, in the areas occupied by the U.S. after World War II."

"That's a huge lie, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"You being a creator was a lie, too, right?"

"Yeah."

"In reality, you're an unemployed hikikomori, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

I held out the contract. Quickly snatching it from my hands, Misaki jumped up. "You finally felt like signing it! You'll be all right now, Satou. You can travel off into the wide world after just a little training."

"Misaki, who are you, really?"

"I told you before, didn't I? I'm a kind girl who rescues young people in pain. This activity is, of course, a part of my project. Please, rest assured, nothing bad will happen. Okay?"

It was a dubious explanation. Still…

"Anyway, with this, our contract is in force! If you break it, the penalty is a million yen, okay?" Misaki pocketed the contract and smiled

blindingly. Right then, I started getting nervous. I had the feeling I had made some gigantic mistake.

Just how much legal force did this contract have? I should have asked my friend from college who had studied law.

Contract for Escape from Hikikomori Life and Support Therein

Name of hikikomori: Satou Tatsuhiro.

Name of escape supporter: Misaki Nakahara.

Defining the hikikomori as party A and the supporter as party B, the following has been contracted between the two parties.

A will confess to B all anguish, complication, complaints, whines, and every other inward thought concerning escape from hikikomori life.

B will do everything in his or her power to aid As escape from hikikomori life and to make his or her return to society (noted as C) succeed. Additionally, during the process toward C, B will attempt in preserve the emotional stability of A.

Conversely, A will speak politely to B.

A will obediently do anything that B instructs.

Furthermore, A will not treat B as an obnoxious person. A will not treat B cruelly.

Naturally, violent acts, such as hitting or kicking, shall not be performed.

Counseling shall take place every evening at the Mita Fourth

District park. Come after eating dinner.

If A observes the contract, A should move toward C.

If A breaks the contract, the penalty is one million yen.

Remembering the contract's contents, I was attacked by severe anxiety. "Forget about it! Give me back the contract!"

But Misaki had long since departed.

I had been left alone, at my absolute limit.

Chapter 07

The Revolving Rock

Part One

Before I knew it, I had gotten run down, both socially and emotionally; it was that kind of summer. Before I knew it, I had been locked in a kind of cage, with no hope for escape; it was that sort of July. I tried calling, "Help me!" Nothing—not love, dreams, hope, effort, friendship, or victory—could save me. I was in real trouble.

At least Yamazaki had some opinions about his future. Even though he was shouting, "Arghhh! Don't screw around with me," at least he had some sort of ambition. He'd been thinking about his family's business since he was little.

"I'll get out of this shitty countryside and make a name for myself in the big city! Y-y-you hypocrites! Just watch and I'll show you all! I have talent! I may not know what kind of talent, but I have it!"

Before I could confirm the existence of my own talent, it seemed as if

fate would force me to return to the countryside, as well. The countryside, with its bizarre family ties, annoying smiles, redneck punks, roads made unnecessarily wide by local politicians, and only one convenience store… I was going to have to make a U-turn back to the awful, crappy countryside. I contemplated this destination with heartfelt regret.

I shouted in a beautifully manly way, too. "Waaaahhh! It's terrible, terrible, terrible!" I didn't know exactly what was terrible; for now, though, something certainly was terrible. In fact, so many terrible things were happening that I couldn't see any way to fix them.

For one thing, my allowance from home finally stopped. Even so, for some reason, the will to work did not bubble up. Even though I had been worn down, I still couldn't go outside. My title as a "high-level hikikomori" wasn't just for show. However, I had to manage my living expenses at the least, or else I might be chased out of my apartment as early as tomorrow. I had to do something.

With my student credit card, I brashly borrowed money. Following that, I sold my furniture. I took my washing machine, refrigerator, TV, computer, kotatsu, and bed to a secondhand shop near my house. I also tried selling my entire library to a used bookstore. In this way, having managed to raise enough money to live on, I'd bought myself a little more time.

Slightly more secure, boredom became the main problem. Both Yamazaki and I became really bored. Alleviating it occupied most of our attention. "What should I do? I have nothing to do."

I conferred with Yamazaki.

He seemed to be at the end of his rope. Lying face down on his

apartment floor, he whispered unenthusiastically, "I'm not in as desperate a position as you, Satou—yet for some reason, I can't calm down. Even if we are escaping from reality, I'd like to be able to do it in a rejuvenating way, if possible."

Escaping from reality… Triggered by his words, a good idea came to me. "Speaking of escaping, that's what people do in their fleering youth, right?"

"Yeah."

"And speaking of fleeting, that reminds me of rock."

I shook Yamazaki's shoulders back and forth. "That's right, rock and roll! Sex, drugs, and violence!"

Yamazaki stood up, swinging his fist about wildly and bellowing loudly, "I see! That's fantastic! Speaking of rock and roll, I really respect Jerry Lee Lewis."

"Who's that?"

"He's the lolicon rocker who, defying social convention, married his thirteen-year-old cousin, making him the so-called giant of the lolicon world. His way of life was truly anti-establishment! *Great Balls of Fire!*"

We decided that our theme from then on would be "sex, drugs, and violence." If we steered our lives in that direction, we might be able to spend every day in a more energetic and happily youthful way. At least, that was our hope, and we clung to it.

Sex

Speaking of sex, it's not for minors under 18. Speaking of "not for minors under 18," erotic games! Even now, Yamazaki kept working on his erotic game. Why? No one could possibly know, but it seemed sad. It was lonely. That was all I knew. I had no idea why, but it made me want to cry.

Drugs

Using the money I had secured from selling my furniture, I bought some serious drugs.

"These are all legal!" Yamazaki complained.

I hung my head. "What else can I do? There's no way I could buy illegal drugs by mail. For a hikikomori, this is the best I can do."'

"Pathetic. That's so lame."

Violence

Finally, Yamazaki and I ended up fighting in my six-mat, one room apartment. In the middle of the empty room, we faced each other in fighting stances. I imitated Bruce Lee, whom I had recently seen on TV. Yamazaki used fighting games as his reference, adopting the crane pose.

Then, we tried to beat up each other. As soon as we started, though, I slipped on the floor and fell. I hit the back of my head as hard as possible. The pain brought tears to my eyes.

"This isn't fun at all," Yamazaki complained.

"Don't say that."

"It just makes me feel even more empty. I know! Should we do this at the park?"

"Beforehand, let's do the drugs, as we already have them. Don't make fun of them just because they're legal. They still work pretty well. We'll have a good time."

Actually, the drugs did work. In fact, the trip was so bad, I thought I would die.

I thought that maybe I should die.

Part Two

However, I didn't die.

I might be living a dismal hikikomori life. At the moment, however, I did technically, have plans to meet someone. As evening fell and all traces of other people had disappeared outside my apartment, I filled my stomach with a late dinner. When it was dark, I set off toward the neighborhood park. The summer night breeze felt good.

I sat on a bench and looked up at the moon and stars in the sky. A black cat sauntered leisurely in front of me. His eyes flashed with the reflection of streetlights.

Ah, it's night. It certainly was night.

Misaki materialized, there in the park.

"You're late." She had been creaking the swing back and forth when noticing me, she energetically jumped off. The black cat crept over to where she stood, and Misaki picked it up. The cat meowed but didn't struggle.

"Good girl. I'll give you some canned food, okay?" Misaki pulled cat food out of the bag on her back. Apparently, she'd been feeding the cat every night. "Cats are great, don't you think?"

"What's great about them?"

"Cats just seem to be content wherever, whenever, even if they'd alone."

I didn't quite comprehend what she meant, but I tried to answer her appropriately. "Cats don't really understand gratitude."

"I know."

"It'll forget all about you soon, Misaki. Investing in cat food is such a waste."

"As long as I give the cat what it wants, it'll be fine. She'll remember me. Don't be cruel. You'll come to the park every night, right?" She gently stroked the cat's back as it gobbled down the food. When it finished eating, it slowly strolled away into the bushes.

We sat down on the bench. Misaki took her "secret notebook" out of her bag. And so, tonight, the first counseling session on escaping from hikikomori life began.

Misaki had called it "counseling." From the very first, her actions and words had been more than strange, so I totally thought it was some kind

of joke. However, it seemed she'd been serious.

"You're late. It says in the contract that you'll come after eating dinner, remember?"

"I just ate dinner—"

"My family eats dinner at seven o'clock."

How the hell should I know that?! I wanted to yell, bur I held it back.

"Well, starting tomorrow, come a little earlier. Anyway, we'll begin your first 'escaping hikikomori life' counseling session now, okay? Here, have a seat."

I moved next to her on the bench, as instructed. Misaki sat beside me, turning to face me.

The park at night… no one else was there. What in the world was about to start? What did she plan to do? I was a little nervous. Misaki put down the huge bag she carried and started rummaging around inside it.

Whispering something like, "Oh, here it is, here it is," she pulled out a college-ruled notebook. On the cover, "Secret Notebook" had been written in black marker.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A secret notebook."

"Like I said, 'what's that?'"

"Uh… it's a secret notebook." Misaki opened the secret notebook and flipped through pages she'd marked. "Well then, I'll start the lecture now?"

Backlit by the street lamps, her face wasn't visible. The tone of her voice was serious, though. Not understanding what was going on, I gulped deeply.

Misaki started her lecture. "Um… I'll begin with an outline of the hikikomori. Okay, what causes someone to become a hikikomori? Do you know, Satou? Hm? You don't? That's what I thought. You dropped out of college, so there's no way your mind could answer this difficult question, Satou. I know. I'm smart, after all. I'm studying for my GED right now. I study five hours every day. Good of me, right? Ha ha ha…"

She laughed a little more before she continued, "According to the results of my research, not just hikikomori, but all emotional problems are caused by an inability to conform to one's environment. Basically, because you can't get along well with the world, various difficulties arise."

Misaki turned to the next page. "Long ago, we humans thought of many different ways to get along with the world. For example, take the idea of gods. There are all kinds of gods. Even in Japan alone, there are eight million… Huh? Eight million? That's a little excessive, isn't it? Is this true? W-well, anyway, there are many gods in the world, and it seems they ease the suffering of quite a lot of people, like those at a church gathering. Those people who can't be saved by Gods think of other means. For example, philosophy."

Misaki began digging around in her bag again. After sticking her head inside the enormous bag, she finally found what she was looking for, "Oh, here it is. Here you go." Pulling out some sort of book, the handed it to me. The title of the book was *Sophie's World*.

"This is kind of hard, so I didn't really understand it, but it seems that this one book can teach you everything you need to know about philosophy. I borrowed it from the library, so read it by tomorrow okay?"

Nonplussed, I took the book. I was at my wit's end over what to do while Misaki's lecture droned on. "Um, well then, after philosophy, we have psychoanalysis! It seems to have been popular from around the nineteenth century, after some guy named Freud thought of it. People say that if you undergo psychoanalysis, your problems really do disappear. For instance, do you remember any dreams you had last night? I'll analyze them for you. Tell me what happened in your dreams, Satou."

I told her. "A really huge, strong snake appeared. It dove into the ocean, and I stuck a thick sword into an apple. Also, I blasted away all around me with a black, shining, amazing gun."

Upon hearing this, Misaki withdrew another paperback from inside her gigantic bag. This one was entitled *Dream Analysis: With This Single Book, You Easily Can Grasp the Depths of Your Psyche!*

"Hm… snake, ocean, apple, sword, gun…" Muttering to herself, she was searching the index when suddenly, she looked away, face reddening. For some reason, I grasped the situation, even in the pitch-black park.

"Th-that's enough Freud! Next, let's do Jung!" Misaki yelled loudly.

"Hey! What are the results of my dream analysis? Misaki, tell me what the big snake could possibly symbolize." I persisted, but she ignored my attempts at sexual harassment.

"Jung… This guy argued with Freud, and it seems he went in a different direction. Well then, let's start a Jungian psychoanalysis."

"Hey, don't ignore me. Wait a second!"

"As far as I can see, you're 'introverted,' and 'emotive'! You're afraid of the 'Great Mother.' Additionally, you also are fighting with the

shadows. How terrible! To learn more, please read this book." Misaki once again pulled out a book and handed it to me. This one was *All About Jung, Explained by Manga!*

My head was starting to hurt, yet Misaki's lecture kept going. And going. From Jung to Adler to Lacan. "I don't understand Lacan! I just can't lock on!"

I was stunned that she could make this horrific pun, smiling all the while. I wanted to go back to my room. As if noticing my reaction, Misaki boldly changed direction. "Oh, I'm sorry for talking about all this difficult stuff. It seems that you really aren't suited to these academic discussions, after all. Satou. That's okay, though. We still have tomorrow."

"Huh?"

"We're people, so it's painful."

I didn't say anything.

"I feel bad for you, experiencing such troubles. Let's look up as we move forward, though. You're fine the way you are. You have dreams so you'll be all right. You're not alone. If you keep walking, you'll find your path. Everyone is cheering for you. As you do your best, you shine. You'll succeed if you keep moving ahead with positive thinking; so, let's walk toward tomorrow together. The future is bright. We're people we're people, we're people…"

Pulling Misaki's bag out of her hands, I upended it. A load books avalanched onto the ground: Public Health Service paperbacks Intelligent Living paperbacks. *Quick Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Complete Mental Illness Manual, The Book to Read When You Stuck in Life, The Rules for Success in Life, Murphy's Ghost, Cerebral Revolution,*

Mitsuo, Mitsuru, etc., etc.

"Hey, Misaki, do you think I'm an idiot?"

Misaki gave me a look that said, "No, I don't," and she shook her head.

Anyway, after a week of interacting with Misaki, the only thing I truly understood was how hard she was trying. She really was working very hard. For the first few days, that effort stalled without result; while working to the best of her ability, her passion was certainly real. Of course, I didn't know where her true intentions lay or what she actually was planning. I didn't know, but I didn't really care, either.

If my thoroughly rotten emotional state could be infused with even just a little energy through this exchange with a girl, I would be happy. Even if it led to problems in the future, I no longer had anything left to lose. Not to mention that, whatever happened, we'd part soon enough Eventually, I would be kicked out of my apartment, or I'd go somewhere else for another reason. Either way, I would disappear soon. Meeting with Misaki was just a way to alleviate my boredom until that time came.

And because I was thinking in such irresponsible terms, I had no trouble at all conversing privately with a girl I barely knew, despite the fact that this situation was one that would usually cause a hikikomori the greatest amount of stress possible.

Of course, no matter how cute Misaki might be, I had no intention of doing anything to her. The sign at the park entrance read, "Beware of

Perverts," but even given the way I looked, I was still a gentlemanly hikikomori. *Please, don't worry, Misaki…*

"What? What are you grinning about?" she asked me.

"Nothing, nothing. More important, what's on today's special training menu?"

Facing me while sitting on the bench, as usual, Misaki peered into her secret notebook. "Hm, on tonight's menu is how to converse with others."

"Eh?"

"In general, hikikomori suck at having conversations. Because they're bad at speaking to others, they tend to shut themselves up in their rooms. Tonight, I thought we could reform that part of you."

"Oh."

"Therefore, starting now, I will teach you wonderful conversational techniques. Please, listen carefully."

Misaki started her lecture, periodically glancing at her secret notebook as I listened carefully. "When talking to people, you get nervous. That leads to being at a loss for words, turning pale, or getting excited. These make your emotional stability erode even further, and your conversation consequently gets worse and worse. How can you break this vicious cycle? The answer is easy: You'll be fine if you avoid getting nervous. Given that fact, how can you avoid getting nervous? Well, why do people get nervous? It's because they lack confidence in themselves. You think your companions may make a fool out of you, they may look down on you, or they may dislike you."

So what? I wanted to butt in, but Misaki's tone was serious.

"Ultimately, the problem comes back to having confidence in

yourself. Having self-confidence, in reality, is a pretty difficult thing to achieve. Truthfully, I don't think you'll be able to gain it through any normal method; but I have a marvelous, revolutionary technique to make the impossible possible. Do you want to know? You do want to know, don't you?"

As she said this, she looked at me, and there was nothing I could do but nod. "All right, listen carefully," Misaki said in her most dignified voice. "This idea is a massive about-face—like on a Copernicus level! In short, if you can't be self-confident, then just imagine the person you're speaking to as even more of a failure than you think you are! That's the method!"

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"You simply assume that the person you're conversing with is a huge failure. You theorize that they're a waste of a human being. Look down on them as much as you can. If you can do that, you should be able to speak well and remain calm, without any nervousness. You'll be relaxed and at ease, right?

"There is one thing you must be careful of. You have to go out of your way to avoid telling the person you're speaking to what you're thinking, because they'll get mad or hurt. If someone looked you in the face and called you trash, or said you were the worst, or labeled you a failure as a human being, you'd be really depressed, right, Satou? That's why I keep quiet."

You mean… I thought. *Could this really be some kind of roundabout criticism of me?* If so, Misaki's expression remained innocent.

I had to ask, "Misaki, might you be putting these conversational techniques' into practice during your daily life?"

"Yes, I am. But they don't really work that well. Most people are better than I am; so, even if I try to believe they're worthless, I usually fail. As far as that goes, though, when I'm talking to you, Satou, I naturally…"

"Naturally…?"

"Forget it. If I told you, it'd hurt you."

I'd been hurt for a long time.

"It's nothing to worry about. Even a person like you, Satou, is useful to someone." With that declaration, Misaki stood up. "That's all for today. See you tomorrow"

Part Three

Yamazaki was working on the game alone. Using the scenario I had half completed, he was creating the game himself. Continuing to wire himself with the hallucinogens we had bought a few days earlier, he silently focused on his computer. Was this another form of escape from reality? It was truly the ultimate way. However, was creating a game on hallucinogens really possible? Leaning over Yamazaki's shoulder, I peered at his computer monitor.

The screen was crammed full of tiny words. "The huge organization that controls painful death, anxiety, evil, hell, poison, the abyss, and the like—this is our enemy, and we must defeat this enemy to win the heroine's love! That is the mission of this game. The enemy is invisible, and you won't know where it is, so watch out! You could be stabbed

from behind. It's dangerous, dangerous…."

"What is this?" I asked Yamazaki.

Yamazaki slowly swiveled his chair. The pupils of his eyes were entirely contracted. His lips were twisted open as wide as possible into a dangerous smile, one that would frighten anyone.

"What do you mean? You can tell by looking, can't you? This is my erotic game. It's an RPG—a role playing game—and the player is the main character. The player progresses in the game by reading the text file. If he reads it, he'll learn all kinds of important things; on top of that, the heroine is moe moe. Look. Amazing, isn't she? The heroine is an alien with cat ears. She's captured by the enemy. When I say enemy, I mean villains—villains you can't see. The real object of the game is to make these invisible enemies visible. That's where the truth of life is found, right? Understand? In other words, I've been awakened to the truth of the world. I realized that my mission is to spread my epiphany to everyone, and then erotic games will become the new century's Bibles. I'll be able to sell a million copies. I'll become rich. So… uh, it's fun. Hey, Satou, you're having a good time, too, aren't you?

Trembling, I stepped back. When I did, Yamazaki let out a metallic-sounding laugh. As if triggered by his own voice, his giggles quickly elevated into an explosion of laughter. "Ha ha ha, ha ha, ha ha ha! Oh, how funny!"

Yamazaki took a horrible fall off the chair, landing on all fours. He crawled toward me, his entire body shaking. His appearance reminded me of horror movie zombies.

I started to panic and stood terrified, rooted to the spot.

Grabbing my ankles, Yamazaki screamed, "It's so funny, so very

funny! There's nothing I can do!"

I was so very scared, I couldn't do anything, either.

"It's so empty, so empty that I can't carry on!"

I felt the same way on that point; but Yamazaki, currently in the throes of his drug trip, was powerfully frightening. I prayed for him to return to normal as quickly as possible, but he did not. Smile quivering, he continued giggling to himself.

Seeing that there was nothing I could do, I decided to give in. I absorbed the white drug through my nasal membranes. It kicked in immediately.

Ah, how enjoyable… How interesting… It feels so nice… This is the best.

Oh… I can't carry on… I'm finished?… It hurts… How pathetic… What can I possibly do?… There's nothing I can do… How painful…

It was another bad trip.

The effects of a hallucinogen are influenced by the psychological state and environment of the user; basically, the outcome depends on the user's frame of mind and physical surroundings. If users feel like they're having a good time when they take the drugs, they'll be in heaven; but if they're depressed already, they'll go straight to hell. Using drugs with the intention of escaping reality can't lead to any positive results.

I knew that, of course. I did, but… but my drug-addled senses had been invaded by a dramatic, tangible fear. It was different from the vague anxiety I felt on a daily basis. It was almost visible—a totally clear, easily understood uncertainty.

Yes, it was a huge but visible, easily understood fear, this uncertainty I even may have wanted it like that. Compared to the daily uncertainties which steadily tortured me little by little, this drug-induced depression

even may have been pleasurable.

Yamazaki turned toward the refrigerator and swung his fist.

"Dammit, if you're going to do it, then come on! I'll face you!" It seemed Yamazaki was confronting an imaginary opponent over there.

I, however, sat trembling in the corner, holding my head and pulling up my legs tight to my chest.

"Stop! Don't come over here!" The enemy was close. Despite my fear, I was somehow having fun. Being chased and killed by villains was a thrilling vision. My paranoia really excited me.

It stimulated me. In short, it was pleasant.

If it was pleasant, it also must be fun.

That's right! In other words, we were happy. I decided this was the best trip ever! Now, I truly understood the rock-and-roll lifestyle. I decided to make that lifestyle even more perfect.

"After drugs comes violence!"

Before the effects of the drugs wore off, we dashed out of the apartment and headed to the park.

We were going to fight. Tonight, we would move our violence to the wide-open park. Like young people in their fleering youth, we had to fight! We had to fight dramatically, spectacularly, with all the passion of K-1 kickboxers! If we did this, we could experience even more pleasure…

The sun had long since set, and there was no sign of anyone around us. If there had been, we would have been in trouble. It would have been embarrassing.

Under the streetlamps of the park, we faced each other. I was wearing a jersey and a T-shirt, and Yamazaki wore a sweatshirt. We

were both dressed to move easily. We were ready.

Because the drugs still hadn't worn off, Yamazaki was loose-tongued. He kept talking incomprehensibly. "This happens a lot. Dramas where two young, good-looking actors, arguing about youth or love or something, fight each other in a park, where everything is wet with rain. 'You don't really understand love!'… 'I love Hitomi with all my heart!'…'Bang! Crack!' That sort of thing…"

Doing stretching exercises, I nodded for him to continue.

"In my heart, I really do long for that kind of drama because there is truth in those television shows. Because there's the introduction, development, turn, and resolution; there's an explosion of emotions, and there's the conclusion… On the other hand, our lives continually are filled with dim, dreamy anxiety, and there are no easily understood dramas, situations, or confrontations—nothing at all like that… Isn't that sort of absurd? I'm twenty, and you're twenty-two, Satou. Even so, we've never really loved anyone, hated anyone, fought as a result of love or hate, or had any of those experiences at all. It's terrible!"

At this point, Yamazaki violently shook me by the shoulders as I stretched my Achilles tendons.

He said, "Let's try fighting dramatically! Beautifully, swiftly, and roughly! Let's fight with those concepts in mind!"

"Yeah!" I let out a brave yell and got into my fighting pose.

And so we started beating each other. Our fight was distressingly pastoral. There were some things that hurt, but punches from a weak man hopped up on drugs had limited force.

Yamazaki desperately was trying to make the fight as exciting as possible, and so he began yelling dramatic (although entirely abstract)

lines, "Satou, you don't understand anything!"

I couldn't let his effort go to waste, so I also shouted something that felt appropriate. "You're the one who's wrong!"

"What part of what I'm saying is wrong?!"

I was at a loss, having been unexpectedly questioned in a concrete manner. The fist I was swinging around stopped as I thought about it for a little while. "For example, how about the fact that you went to the Yoyogi Animation Institute?" I responded hesitantly.

As I said that, Yamazaki abruptly aimed a kick at me. "Don't make fun of Yoyogi Animation!"

"Ow! Why are you suddenly kicking me for real, you—"

"Don't think you can talk so big even though you're a hikikomori!"

The blood rushed to my head. "Die, lolicon! Die, you erotic game otaku!"

I swung my right fist as hard as I could, smashing it into Yamazaki's stomach. He groaned, charged, and tackled me, still groaning as he did. Tangled up together, we fell to the ground. Yamazaki straddled my head; I could see the moon behind him. I would be beaten to a pulp if I stayed like this.

Hooking my leg around his neck, I somehow managed to get out from under him. We were both breathing heavily. Yamazaki glared at me; then, he looked down, giggling. Finally, he sighed loudly, "Ah, that was great."

I sighed, too.

"It's not even close to being over yet. Let's keep fighting until we die," he said. We kept fighting: Wild kicks and limpid punches, the passionate battle between two weak men. It hurt. It really, really hurt.

Yet it was fun—fun and empty. A punch sank into the pit of my stomach, raising bile and making my eyes overflow with tears, and I was happy. Having just been kicked in the groin, Yamazaki looked cool, jumping up and down.

Jeez, what in the hell are we doing? I transferred this doubt into my fist—punched and was punched.

Suddenly, I remembered that it was already July. It wouldn't be long. Something had to change soon. Likely, I would decide something before long. I was sure I'd be laughing then, laughing and smiling. *You agree, don't you, Yamazaki…?*

For now, we were covered in scrapes and bruises. Everything hurt. Our entire bodies ached terribly. One of my front teeth felt loose. Yamazaki had a perfect black eye. My right fist was raw and bleeding.

We had just had our first little fight.

For good measure, I gave Yamazaki one more punch to the face. As I did, he caught my arm, and I tripped and fell. Following up, Yamazaki went on to lock my joints and twist my arm.

"Ow, ow, it's gonna break, it's gonna break!" I tried to tap out on the ground.

"I'll break it, I'll break it, I'll break it with a snap!"

I bit down on Yamazaki's calf as hard as I could. He screamed, "That's against the rules!"

"Shut up, what do I care? Death to Yoyogi Animation!"

"Like I said, when I hear talk like that, I get really pissed off!"

It appeared that our fight was about to become increasingly, emptily escalated.

Then, we heard, "Officer!"

Eh?

"They're over here, Officer!" It was a young woman's high-pitched shout.

Yamazaki jumped up immediately and ran for dear life back to the apartment.

Leaving me behind, he had run away alone.

Several minutes later, I found myself being hit by Misaki. They were only so-called "girl punches"; because of my fight with Yamazaki, though, I was already a bit beat up, and her blows jangled my bones. Bellowing at the top of her lungs, with what no longer even resembled a human voice, Misaki continued hitting me.

I ducked my head.

Misaki got in several dozen more punches before finally calming down.

In other words, the voice calling, "Officer!" had been Misaki pretending to call for the police. After eating dinner, Misaki had come to the park as usual, where she saw two men arguing loudly and beating up each other. When she realized I was one of them, she'd naturally been upset.

Gathering a great deal of courage, she seemed to have felt that she had to help. Because no one was around and she didn't have a cell phone, though, she didn't know what to do. Finally, she decided to pretend that a policeman was right there in order to save me.

"I can't believe you! I was so worried! I thought you might be killed!"

Actually, I felt bad for upsetting Misaki, who now had tears in her eyes. I decided to make her laugh with an interesting story." Well, in the shade of that bush over there, a girl was being attacked by a pervert. I approached them and intervened, trying to save the girl, but the rapist suddenly flipped out. He pulled a knife from his pocket and jumped me! No, no, it was really dangerous! If I hadn't been there, someone could have gotten killed."

"That's another big lie, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"What were you really doing?"

I told her everything.

After another good outburst, Misaki wore a pained expression for some reason. Sitting on the bench, she muttered, "That's not good. Don't fight with your friends. Even as a joke, violence isn't good—not at all"

"What are you talking about? Don't be so serious. It was pretty fun; I've never punched anyone or been punched before. I actually feel surprisingly refreshed—"

"I said, it's bad!"

"Why? Karate is good for you." I made a show of shadowboxing in front of her. As I mimicked a right hook, Misaki trembled and covered her head with both arms.

"Huh?" I said.

She peered through the openings in her arms at me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She didn't reply but tentatively put both arms down. Once more, I feigned a right hook. Again, Misaki guarded her head with both arms.

As her reaction was amusing, I repeated my punching motions several times. In the end, Misaki shrank up, frozen in that position, arms covering her head.

Her strange position caused her sleeve to rise to her elbow, and I took the opportunity to glance at her skin.

By the blue-white light of the streetlamps, I could see that her arm was spotted with what looked like numerous burn marks. They were circular scars, with a diameter of about five millimeters a piece. They bore a strong resemblance to the brands that countryside punks burned into each other to prove their bravery.

As if noticing my gaze, Misaki yanked down her sleeve. In a shaky voice, she asked, "Did you see?"

"See what?" I pretended not to know what she was talking about.

Now that I thought about it, Misaki always wore long sleeves. Even in the recent heat, she'd continued wearing them—but so what?

I spoke to her in a cheerful voice. "What about today's counseling?"

Misaki didn't answer. Her body still curled defensively on top of the bench, she shook violently. Even her teeth were chattering.

A rather long stretch of time passed.

Finally, Misaki announced, "I'm leaving," tottering uncertainly toward the park exit.

From behind, I dazedly watched her leave, debating whether I should call out to her. Misaki stopped in front of the swing set and turned around to ask, "Do you hate me now, after all?"

"What?"

"You probably won't come anymore now." She was the kind of girl who would make these strangely decisive declarations. We faced each

other, about sixteen feet apart.

Misaki looked me in the eye, soon dropping her gaze. Then, once more, she stole a glance at me. "Will you come tomorrow?"

"If I break our promise, I'll have to pay a one-million-yen penalty, won't I?"

"Uh, yeah. That's right!" Finally, Misaki smiled a little.

I went home to my apartment. After swathing my body in compresses, I slept.

Chapter 08

Infiltration

Part One

It actually might have had something to do with a hormonal imbalance in my brain. Like crashing and receding waves, my mania and depression alternated, and that was how every day went. Just when I thought I felt better, I wanted to die so bad the very next day that I wasn't good for anything.

Despite using drugs to force myself to be more energetic, I couldn't carry on once again after they wore off. Shame about my past and anxieties for the future, as well as many other fears, assaulted me simultaneously. This ensuing depression was a rebound from my ultra-high-energy periods and, as such, was completely, horribly severe.

Even Misaki's nightly counseling, which I should have grown accustomed to by then, remained frightening. Anxiety of an unknown origin had enfolded me, and the very uncertainty of that origin fanned

my fear even more.

The initial, readily noticeable symptom was that my gaze started to wander and I would become unable to look others in the eye while speaking to them. Oh, I was just like some overly self-conscious middle school kid. I felt embarrassed from the bottom of my heart. And because I was aware of that embarrassment, my behavior would become even stranger and more suspicious. It was a vicious cycle.

Anyway, for that night, I tried smoking to calm myself down in front of Misaki. My hands, now prone to shaking, took out a cigarette and lit it, using a cheap lighter. Damn—it was running out of fuel! *How can this be? This sucks!* I didn't know what to do with the tobacco and lighter I was holding, but I'd do anything possible to avoid the humiliation of having to put them back in my pocket. I kept trying as hard as I could to light it. *Click, click, click, click…* I kept struggling and, finally, I succeeded—thank heavens!

I immediately turned away from Misaki and, instead, focused too much on smoking my cigarette. I just kept smoking away, wasting five yen with every puff. My lungs hurt and my guts hurt, too. The end of my cigarette was shaking rapidly. On the back of my neck, a cold, sticky sweat—

"What's wrong?" asked Misaki. As was usual for our counseling sessions, we faced each other at night on one of the park benches.

"The problems caused by my chronic illness!" I replied.

"What do you mean by 'problems'?"

That's what really bothered me. Young girls these days didn't know anything. *Go study a little more!* I wanted to yell at her; of course, that would be impossible to do. The awful, useless traits acquired through

several years of hikikomori life—my agoraphobia, fear of eye contact, and all my other anxiety disorders—now held me down with considerable power.

Hm… Did I lock my apartment door? Was I certain I'd put out my cigarette? More important: Misaki, don't look at me like that with those adorable eyes! Not to mention, stop being so silent. Stop watching me without saying anything! It makes me unbelievably nervous. My stomach really does hurt.

I had to say something fast. "By the way, Misaki, do you like snacks?" *What the hell was that supposed to mean?!*

"No."

"Usually, girls around your age always are eating some kind of snack, twenty-four hours a day, right? Just like a little animal… crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch. What's up with that? Is it because they're young and have fast metabolisms, so they continually have to replenish their calories or they'll die? That's got to be it, huh?"

Should I just die?

She didn't say anything.

Should I just die?

"I won't die! And that's because I'm an energetic man! This overflowing energy is the best! I'm only twenty-two! My future stretches out before me! 'A neeew toooomorrow is here, one of hopesssss…'" I sang.

Misaki clutched my shirt sleeve.

"Hm?"

"Let's go into the city, the day after tomorrow," she said, continuing to pull on my sleeve, "near the station, maybe. Together. Someone

important once said long ago, 'Throw out your books and go to the city,' or something like that. That's not a lie. It was written in a book I read recently, so it's about time for us to go into the city. If we do that, I think you'll definitely head in a good direction. Okay?"

Without thinking, I nodded.

Misaki's request had instilled a new fear within me. To go into the city, in broad daylight, with a mysterious girl whose true identity I still didn't know… No question, this rash action would put an unbelievable amount of pressure on me. Completely overwhelmed by it, I undoubtedly would do something embarrassing once again. There was no chance that I would avoid doing something incomprehensibly pathetic Ah, I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay locked up in my room.

Regardless, a promise is a promise. I reminded myself that the first step to being an outstanding member of society would be to faithfully honor my promises to others— I wasn't a member of society, though; I was just a hikikomori.

Anyway, I felt a sharp pain in my stomach. The tension and unrelenting impatience reminded me of the feelings I used to have the day before a test. For someone whose will was weak like mine, this pressure weighed down heavily on me with a palpable force.

However, just as Dostoyevsky or somebody had written in a story, along with pain that exceeded normal bounds also came an undeniable pleasure. In essence, when stress surpasses a particular limit, humans get high on it for some reason. Getting extremely run down, for example,

might make a person rashly agreeable. This feeling, in turn, would raise the excitement and the enjoyment.

"Right, Yamazaki?"

"Yes, sure. I have no idea what you're talking about, though."

Today, as usual, Yamazaki had been grinding away at his game since the early morning. His body language somehow suggested that he might be enjoying himself in some ghastly way.

"Let me see how far you've gotten," I said, but he blocked the computer with his body. He must have been making an especially erotic game

Well, whatever bizarre erotic game Yamazaki was working on meant nothing to me now. I decided I should be eating breakfast right about then and opened the fridge.

"Huh? What, Yamazaki, you're out of food?"

"Hey, you! Don't eat someone else's food every day as though it's yours! And in their own apartment, no less!"

"No matter what you say, because I sold the fridge in my room to that secondhand shop…" Trying to make suitable excuses, I took some instant ramen from its usual place in the cabinet.

Just then, the doorbell rang. A visitor?

Yamazaki slowly stood up from his computer desk and opened the door in the front hall. Standing there were two religious solicitors. However, today's solicitors weren't Misaki and her aunt but a young man around twenty, wearing a suit, and a roughly middle-school-aged boy in a navy blazer. I wondered whether perhaps the routes had been changed.

Either way, the solicitors' actions remained unchanged.

"Um, we're handing out these magazines…" The solicitor handed two pamphlets to Yamazaki. "Uh, see, we're spreading the word about our religion…"

Yamazaki tried to chase the solicitors away with some appropriate speech.

Watching them, I suddenly had a wonderful idea. Joining them at the front door, I pounded Yamazaki as hard as I could on the back before interjecting, "What are you saying, Yamazaki?! Earlier, didn't you say that you were interested in such literature?"

"Huh?"

Ignoring Yamazaki, who had turned to give me a look that meant, "What are you talking about, you idiot?" I faced the solicitors and rattled on, in one breath: "Actually, we've been interested in your activities for a while. Could we possibly convince you to let us attend one of your meetings?"

Part Two

Last night, when we parted, Misaki had whispered, "Tomorrow, it's my turn to present at missionary school, and I don't want to."

"What's that?" I asked, and Misaki falteringly described it.

Missionary school was apparently a kind of assembly where "research students" could perfect their skills at "service activities." The following day, she would have to give a speech in front of everyone.

She used so many technical religious terms that an outsider like me

couldn't really understand what she was talking about. When I tried to get her to explain more fully, Misaki quickly got up from the bench to go home. She left, saying merely, "Anyway, as I have this thing that I have to do tomorrow, we'll have to go into the city the day after that. Don't forget your promise."

That was last night. Today, Misaki's religious group would hold a meeting, and at that meeting, she would have to play a really difficult role. Having put all this together, an idea struck me. Today was the perfect opportunity to find out who Misaki really was! Summoning my courage, I begged the solicitors, "Please, take us with you and allow us to observe!"

Apparently, it was a rule that normally, outside observers first had to attend the "literature research" that took place every Wednesday. Thus, the two solicitors appeared uncertain what to do with me. I continued to entreat them, "It must be today! Please, take us to the meeting today!"

After I begged them for a few more minutes, they finally gave in. They disclosed the location of the "Imperial Hall" and the meeting time. "It starts at six o'clock in the evening. If you tell them you've come 'on Kaneda's sponsorship,' you'll be allowed to enter."

It was early evening. Having disguised ourselves in strange clothing, we quickly walked up the road toward the Imperial Hall.

My reason for infiltrating the meeting was to observe Misaki's private life, so I could figure out her real motivations. This was the

reason that I decided to disguise myself. In the beginning, Yamazaki stubbornly resisted my attempts to get him to join me, but I finally convinced him. "Infiltrating a religious organization is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, you know! It'll be interesting!" Eventually, he yielded to my half-assed argument and, in the end, happily disguised himself.

I wore the black suit I had bought when I entered college so that I would look like a prize recruit. I pulled a tulip-pink hat down low over my eyes and donned dark purple sunglasses. Even I thought I looked ridiculous.

For his part, Yamazaki wore platform shoes to make himself about four inches taller, put green contacts in his eyes—and on top of all that, bleached his hair gold. I had no idea why he even owned such an idiotic thing as platform shoes. Still, it was the perfect disguise.

Yet, I remained a bit anxious. I was afraid that our voices might expose our true identities. "What do you think, Yamazaki? There's no way we can change our voices, is there?"

When I expressed my worry on this point, Yamazaki dragged me into the department store near the station, and we headed toward the fourth-floor toy store. At the party goods section, he picked up some helium gas. It had been popular a while ago because if you inhaled it, your voice would sound like a duck.

"Ah! You're smart!" I thumped Yamazaki on the back.

He stuck out his thumb and grinned. He was having a great time.

In this way, we completed all our preparations and triumphantly headed toward the Imperial Hall, which was located at the edge of the shopping center near the station. People passing us—clearly a shady

pair, squeaking in high "duck" voices—threw perplexed glances in our direction. Normally, we would have been intimidated by their stares; but only for today, we weren't scared of other people. My dark glasses blocked the glances, and I had a friend in Yamazaki, who bravely walked beside me.

More than anything else, the "energy-giving drug" I had bought through the mail was working quite well. Only half a day earlier, I had been suffering from anxieties I couldn't imagine escaping—but now, I was suffused with energy. Apparently, just a few milligrams of generic drugs could drastically change people's emotions.

"Is this it?" Yamazaki asked in his duck voice once we had exited the narrow alley that ran next to the tracks, pointing at a four-story building next to a convenience store.

I checked the map the solicitor had drawn for me. The information board at the building's entrance also announced, "Third Floor, Imperial Hall." There was no mistake; this was it. It was great that we had arrived at our destination, but I felt unexpectedly let down.

Contrary to its powerful-sounding name, the Imperial Hall was a rather worn-out old building that rented out office space to small businesses. The first floor was a real estate company and the second floor housed a tax attorney's office, leaving only the third floor to be occupied by the religious group. Colored red by the sunset, the rental space looked even more faded. I had imagined a huge temple decorated in gold leaf and the like, so I was taken by surprise.

Still, it was about time to start our infiltration. "L-let's go, Yamazaki."

"Yeah, let's, Satou."

Fortifying our will, we climbed the narrow stairs of the building.

In the end, our infiltration of the hall succeeded easily.

No one we passed even obliquely mentioned our strange disguises. Although I had told yet another gigantic lie: "Actually, my eyes are so bad, I need my sunglasses." I said this despite not having been asked. And everyone said, "Oh my, how terrible," and took pity on me.

That's right: They were actually good people.

"Good evening."

"Welcome."

"Thank you for coming."

A housewife, a female middle school student, and a businessman greeted us with invigorating smiles on their faces. Bowing our heads to them, we continued up the narrow stairs and stepped into the meeting hall. And once again, we tasted disappointment.

The interior of the hall lacked any religious atmosphere. Adornments such as candles, crosses, and altars were nowhere to be found. Instead, inside the room, a podium like those found in school auditoriums occupied center stage, faced by rows of evenly spaced metal folding chairs. The room could accommodate about one hundred people. The floor and walls were painted uniformly in a soft cream color, and the fluorescent lighting was bright. This relaxed space, the meeting room, basically resembled a normal town hall.

For now, we sat in folding chairs at the very back, hunching down to make ourselves as invisible as possible. However, that attempt soon

failed miserably. Yamazaki and I were surrounded by hospitable, smiling people—young and old, male and female. It looked as though the young solicitor wed seen the previous day had told everyone to expect visitors beforehand.

"I hear you're interested in the Bible," said a housewife with a child in her arms. "After all, faith is an issue that everyone has to face."

A young man about my age said, "Please, take your time and watch."

A high-school-aged girl said—

They were all speaking to us at the same time.

Returning their greetings in my duck voice, I felt increasingly anxious. *This is bad. At this rate, we'll stand out. Or rather, we're already standing out plenty. Misaki doesn't seem to have arrived yet; the way it's going, though, it's only a matter of time before she sees through our disguises.*

For the moment, we decided to retreat temporarily. Asking the housewife where the bathroom was, we hurried from the meeting hall.

"This is no good, Satou."

"It's bad, isn't it, Yamazaki?"

We caught our breath while relieving ourselves in the sparkling clean bathroom.

"Why are those people being so friendly to shady people like us?"

"I'm kind of moved." I was somewhat surprised by myself. This was the first time in my long life that I had ever experienced anything like this. A large number of people had openly welcomed me with smiles on their faces. I had no idea how to deal with it.

"Ha ha ha ha, maybe I should convert!"

I heard Yamazaki, who had gone into the private stall, suddenly burst into laughter. Next came the sound of toilet paper unrolling. I

heard him blow his nose, and then he came out of the stall. The pupils of his eyes had dilated behind his colored contacts. White powder stuck to his sleeves.

"How about you, Satou?" Yamazaki held out a plastic packet filled with the drug. I gently refused. As my espionage activities were about to begin, I couldn't afford to lose my level-headed judgment.

Putting tissues inside my mouth, I changed the contours of my face creating an even more perfect disguise. Yamazaki, an off-the-chart smile plastered across his face, meanwhile busied himself walking in circles around the bathroom.

A short time later, we heard a choral hymn coming from beyond the bathroom wails. The assembly seemed to have begun.

Casually, we headed toward the meeting hall.

As I mentioned, the meeting hall's interior lacked any sort of religious atmosphere at all. It looked like a youth training center. Even so…

Why had I gotten goose bumps up and down my spine? I was moved. It might have been a side effect of the drugs I'd taken before leaving the apartment. My emotional amplification might have been nothing more than a side effect. But…

Almost one hundred people had gathered in this hall, and they were singing without hesitation, with remarkable spirit. Older men, older women, young men, young women—they had turned in unison to face the lectern and single-mindedly sang a hymn praising God. Here, I could certainly feel holiness. *Oh, this is true religion! This is wonderful!*

Anyway, wrapped up in the hymn, I moved quickly along the wall of the meeting hall and arrived back at a seat along the very edge. When the hymn ended, a middle-aged man standing at the podium began to pray. He seemed to be the most important person there.

"Great Creator, who made the heavens and this Earth, too, along with us humans, may praise and glory be returned to your great name." Everyone looked forward, listening attentively to his prayer. No one looked at us.

It was going as planned.

Or so I thought. As he was finishing his prayers, the important man at the podium said something like, "Thanks to the aid of the Holy Spirit, you were all able to gather here again today. Many children, as well as new people…"

New people? Who? Who are they?

They were us.

Everyone's gazes immediately turned toward us. I pulled the tulip hat even farther down over my eyes. Yamazaki, as though competing with everyone else, flashed his insane smile.

At the edge of my peripheral vision, I could see Misaki. She was in front of me, in the seat closest to the pedestal. She hadn't realized we were there. Relaxing, I stopped Yamazaki, who was trying to wave to everyone.

"Well then, we give you all our thanks in the name of the Son, Lord Jesus Christ, and give you our prayers."

"Amen." The congregation spoke as one. Only our duck voices stood out terribly in the chorus.

The purpose of this meeting was to improve proselytizing techniques. This was why it was called "missionary school."

First, a veteran male follower stood at the podium and spoke as an example to follow. After that, the missionary students expounded on various subjects for six minutes at a time. At the end, the "director" gave a three-tiered assessment ("good," "work harder," or "needs improvement") to each student's discussion.

At least, that's how the housewife sitting next to me explained it.

Bowing politely to her, I casually assessed the scene. Even though it was a weekday evening, a decent number of people had gathered. What caught my eye first was the huge number of housewives. They were all extremely normal, middle-aged women, like the kind you'd find shopping at any nearby supermarket. In addition, there were businessmen, corning straight to the assembly on their way home from work. Finally, there were young people on their way home from school. A wide variety of people had gathered in this meeting hall.

The more senior male followers wore serious expressions at the podium, and I was fascinated by their discussions. Some people even wrote down the contents of these lectures in their notebooks. The speeches once again contained the sort of vocabulary that made normal people's heads hurt. "Armageddon" and "Satan" and other such wonderful terms kept coming up, and so my stomach began to ache.

At any rate, I was certain that there were about one hundred people gathered here, and that they were all very, very serious.

"The birth of mankind was six thousand years ago."

"Noah's Ark is on Mount Ararat."

"Satan's war will begin soon."

"According to the Book of Revelations…"

Are you all from Gakken Mu!?[25] I wanted to yell, but Yamazaki and I were vastly outnumbered.

Finally, the first lecture ended. In summation, this was its message: The decay of this world is spreading visibly. Political corruption is unending, disputes break out ceaselessly around the world, and brutal urban crime just goes on and on. Youths are addicted to licentious relationships, adults seek only material worth, and morality falls further and further by the wayside. In shore, this is Satan's doing. Those in this world ruled by Satan are unaware that they do his bidding, and this is precisely why Armageddon draws near. Before Armageddon arrives, we must save as many people as possible from damnation. This is the goal of our mission.

Apparently, an antagonism between God and Satan existed, and those without faith would fall into hell.

The student lectures that followed seemed to have similar themes. "Praise God, hate Satan" appeared to be the general policy. They all seemed to have practiced quite a bit for this day and skillfully referenced passages from the Bible, speaking without hesitation. I could see some signs of nervousness; even so, they spoke proudly. Each time the bell rang, marking the end of the allotted six minutes, everyone clapped. I clapped, too. Continuing in this way, eventually, the young people's speeches ended.

Next… Yamazaki and I exchanged glances: Misaki's turn had come.

I was expectant. I wanted her to use ridiculous lines like those I heard each night at counseling. I wanted her to make me laugh and feel cheerful.

However, Misaki, at the podium, was shaking slightly, her face pale. During the entire time, she had nothing interesting to say. In a vague, flat monotone, she merely gave a passable speech about the Bible, staring at her shoes the entire time.

She seemed to be in pain. Her demeanor reminded me of a girl who, from elementary school on, everyone had bullied.

Missionary school ended.

After a ten minute break, a "service meeting" was scheduled. During the break, everyone chatted amiably—a group of housewives, boys, and young men. Each group gathered together, talking and smiling happily.

"Kazuma is in Bethel—"

"—servants volunteering—"

"Anyway, in the reclamation work we did before—"

"—the Satomi sisters finally were baptized."

Specialized, technical terms were used often, so I couldn't really follow the conversations well.

I looked toward the corner of the meeting hall where Misaki sat alone, stooped over on a steel chair. She was making herself small, trying as hard as she could to not stand out. There, in the corner of the room, she was destroying any trace of herself. She really was pale. Each time someone passed her, Misaki looked downward. It appeared as though she feared someone might try to talk to her. During the break, no one spoke to her. That seemed to be what she wanted.

In the friendly meeting hall, she alone stood out from the

surroundings.

"Let's go home." I nudged Yamazaki toward the door.

"What are you saying, Satou? The service meeting is about to start!"

Yamazaki's eyes were bloodshot, and I had some idea why. In the technical terms we were most familiar with—that is to say, in the vocabulary of erotic games—service was defined as "a special type of loving massage that a maid in an apron performs for her master."

"This is a service meeting! Those girls over there will perform their services for us!"

"There's no way that's going to happen!"

Putting the angry Yamazaki into a full nelson, I muscled him outside. As we approached the building's main exit, a voice called out from behind, "Hey, you!"

It was the younger of the two solicitors we'd encountered earlier, the middle-school-aged boy. His hands thrust in his blazer pockets, he glared at us. "You guys are really here just to make fun, right?"

Suddenly, Yamazaki took off. He ran away without even glancing back.

Once again, I was left alone.

However, the boy didn't yell at me. In fact, we started walking along the dark road together. Even though it was already summer, the night wind was unseasonably chilly. The boy was smoking a cigarette. He exhaled, "Ah…"

"That's against the commandments, I think."

Forestalling me, the boy drew a Zippo from his pocket and lit another cigarette with what seemed to be a practiced hand.

Walking on my right side, he explained, "Sometimes, people like you

want to see something weird, so they come to observe the meetings. Stupid students, like you guys. Well then, what did you think? Was it funny?"

I didn't say anything.

"I'm not doing this religion thing because I like it, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"It's my parents. Both my mom and dad love religion. In our house, I'm the only one with a decent head on his shoulders. If I ever said that I wanted to leave the church, what do you think would happen? I once said to my mom, 'I want to join a school activity, and I want to play at friends' houses.' When I did, that old hag started screaming, 'You devil!' She wouldn't even make me lunch for days."

The boy laughed. "I go along with my parents enough for them not to get mad; and then, when I'm outside the house, I do what I want."

He spent his time at school like a normal kid, I concluded, and while at home, he lived as a devout, religious person. He was living a double life.

"What I'm saying is, you guys should be sure not to make the mistake of joining up." He sounded serious. "Everyone made a fuss over you today, right? Everyone seemed happy, right? You probably thought something dumb like, 'maybe I could get along with nice people such as these,' right? You're wrong. That's their trick. They're not acting out of any kind of selfless love. It's a way to get you to convert.

"Once you're on the inside, it's just like any other normal society. Everyone wants to be the leader. Everyone wants to go to the holy land. My father is desperately trying to set things up for himself to advance—sending presents to the leaders, trying to raise his position, no matter

what. It's really idiotic. You saw what happened today, didn't you? That girl who presented last was just a nondescript researcher until recently, but her family kept telling her to enter missionary school until finally, she did. When she, a family member, presents at the missionary school, her aunt gains status."

I fished for more information about Misaki.

"Eh?" The boy blinked. "Well, that girl just recently became a researcher. She's a normal girl—an adopted child, or some kind of ward of that older woman. The uncle seems to have no interest in religion, which might prove to be a saving grace. No, I guess she's torn between two things, which is even harder. She always seems troubled, for some reason."

I was deeply grateful to the boy for this inside information.

When we parted, the boy admonished, "Like I said, don't do it. You absolutely must not convert. Well, I don't really care if you convert; if you do, though, don't have kids."

I nodded slightly and returned to my apartment.

Part Three

The next day, Misaki and I walked through the city streets. The sky was a cloudless blue. As it was Saturday, there were a lot of people near the station, and it was all a little dizzying for me.

As promised, I'd met her at the neighborhood park at one o'clock in the afternoon, and we'd gone straight to the station. About two hours

had passed, and we were still walking. We just kept walking. Although Misaki walked in front of me, ostensibly in the lead, I got the feeling that we'd been walking around and around the same roads for a while.

Still, Misaki's footsteps remained steady.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "Um, where are we walking?"

Misaki turned around. "What?"

"I mean, what's our destination?"

"We can't just walk like this?"

I rolled my eyes toward the sky.

Misaki stopped and folded her arms, deep in thought. "Hm. Now that you mention it, it is kind of strange. Thinking about it more carefully, I guess most people do try to go somewhere."

I had nothing to say.

"Hey, where do you think people normally would go?"

It's not like I have an answer. To begin with, what in the hell were we doing? It was Saturday, in the middle of the afternoon, and we had met to walk around in the city. *Who in the world are we, anyway?* If I could answer that question, maybe our destination would change.

At any rate, I asked, "Misaki, is there anywhere you'd like to go?"

"No."

"Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Not yet."

For the time being, we decided to go to a nearby family restaurant.

As we entered the family restaurant, Misaki said, "This is the first time

I've eaten at a place like this."

I smoked a cigarette. The tip was shaking slightly. It was painful for me. I wanted sunglasses. If I could just have sunglasses, I wouldn't have to worry about strangers staring at me.

Misaki ordered the lunch special. She ate with vigor while I sipped my coffee.

Dammit, I thought. The caffeine was making it even more difficult to stay calm. Soon, I would start acting suspiciously.

Misaki was rather cheery, however. She looked like she was having fun making some sort of origami from the paper napkins set up on the table.

"Look, it's finished. Isn't it amazing?" It was a crane.

"It is amazing. You're very skilled." I praised her.

My stomach was starting to hurt, so we left the family restaurant.

We walked for about another half hour before heading to a café. I drank some black tea, and Misaki ate cake. I was trying to remember the original reason we were meeting like this.

On that night, Misaki had said, "Let's go into the city. If we do that, I think you'll definitely head in a good direction."

Oh, right. In short, this was another part of the hikikomori escape program, and it didn't mean we were on a date or anything. And then, there was the previous night. After watching Misaki last night, I was even more mystified by her true identity. For starters, the evening had erased my theory that all this was just a covert religious recruitment on her part. Given how little she had fit in with the surroundings at the assembly, it was unlikely that she'd zealously try to convert strangers.

In the end, who was she? Even now, she remained a huge mystery.

What should I do, hanging out like this with such a mysterious girl? What should I do? Finally, with no idea what else to do, I simply kept silent.

Misaki pulled another book out of the bag that she always carried. This one was *The Many Words That Guide You: A Collection of Proverbs That Will Echo in Your Heart*. Another strange book… I was no longer surprised.

Moving her cake plate aside, Misaki opened the book on the table.

"Let it be." Saying this, she intently looked at me. "It seems to be a saying by a man named John. What do you think this means?"

"L-let things be as they are."

"Ah, that's a great saying!"

Eventually, our meandering took us back to the manga café where Misaki worked occasionally. The man sitting at the register nodded at her. Acting like a regular customer, I took a receipt. Then, we sat down in the very back of the room.

The place was basically deserted.

Drinking free cola, I concentrated on reading manga. Misaki, who sat across from me, watched me and drank orange juice. I was incredibly distracted, but there was nothing I could do about it. I felt like a hole was about to open in my stomach.

Finally, I couldn't put up with it. There was no way I could read manga like this. I tried speaking. "Misaki?"

"Hm?"

"There aren't many people in this manga café, are there?"

"It's because of the recent downturn in the economy."

I looked over at the man behind the counter. "That man, how is he related to you?"

"He's my uncle. I'm always causing him trouble; but because I'm leaving before long, I think he'll forgive me."

It sounded like they had some sort of complicated family dynamic; however, I didn't want to hear that story, so I changed direction. "Anyway, Misaki, do you enjoy your religious activities?"

"Not really. I trouble people all the time."

"Trouble?"

"You know—how to phrase it? I disturb the atmosphere. Well, my presence there depresses a lot of other people. Actually, it would be best if I weren't anywhere."

"You could just leave the group."

"I can't. I have to do something to repay my aunt."

"Misaki, you don't really believe in God, do you?"

Misaki put her cup of juice on the table. It made a small clank. "I do think it would be nice if God existed. If I could, I'd like to believe, but it's rather difficult."

She sounded disappointed. In a discouraged tone, she gave an abrupt hypothesis. "To start with, if God really existed, He would have to be a terrible villain. Thinking about it comprehensively, I've come to that conclusion."

"Huh?"

"Well, for human beings, the ratio of painful things to enjoyable things has to be about nine to one. One time, I wrote it all down in my notebook and calculated it." Misaki took out her secret notebook and spread it open on the table.

"See, there's the pie chart. If you look, you can see clear as day that the happy times—the times when you think, 'How fun! I'm glad I'm

alive!'—don't make up even one tenth of life. I worked this out properly with a calculator, so there's no mistake."

I rather wondered what kind of calculation methods she'd used, but Misaki didn't show me any other pages. I had no intention of going out of my way to infringe on her privacy further.

Misaki continued, "That's why. Any God who would purposefully create such a painful world must be a really terrible guy, don't you think? It's a logical conclusion, isn't it?"

"Misaki, didn't you just say that you wanted to believe in God?"

"Yeah. I do want to believe. I think I wish did God did exist. I mean…"

"You mean?"

"If that type of bad God did exist, then we could go on living in good health. If we could push the responsibility for our misery onto God, then we would have that much more peace of mind, wouldn't we?"

It was a complicated discussion. I folded my arms and pretended to think deeply about it, but my mind wasn't working properly.

To begin with, Misaki, how serious about this are you? You've been smiling bizarrely for a while now. From start to finish, I felt as though I'd been trapped in a deceptive fog.

In the end, though, her words sounded honest and heartfelt. "If I could believe in God," she whispered, "I could become happy. God is a bad guy; even so, I know I could become happy."

"The problem is," she continued, "the problem is… I have a poor imagination, so I can't believe in God very easily. Look, couldn't He create some really showy miracle for me, just like He does in the Bible?"

She was the kind of girl who said these unreasonable things.

After we chatted for about an hour longer, I decided it was about time to leave. When I went to pay, the man behind the register said, "Don't worry about it. Please, be kind to her."

I felt that this was a strange thing to say to a guy getting to know a girl Misaki's age, but the man's weary expression was strangely compelling. I bowed my head slightly and hurried for home.

Back at my apartment, I was incredibly surprised.

In the middle of my room, a life-sized, mannequin-like doll had been set up. Wobbling with each step, Yamazaki circled the doll.

"Welcome back, Satou! This is our object of worship." I was speechless.

"The other day, I heard that a school acquaintances older brother had a Rurirurі[26] life-sized figure he bought a long time ago that he didn't know what to do with. Right away, I did everything I could to get it! Please, Satou, you worship her, too—this pale, young little, adorable Rurirurі!"

The doll seemed to be some anime character. Yamazaki was prostrating himself before a life-sized doll that was modeled after a girl in the upper years of elementary school.

Looking around, I saw that the metal tin where we kept our drugs was empty. Yamazaki had finished all the rest.

"Yes, I believe I did use the drugs! I experienced the greatest trip of this century. Yes! This time, I had a real epiphany. Indeed, Satou, I've seen the very structure of this world." After rubbing his forehead at the

feet of the doll, Yamazaki suddenly stood up and faced me.

"I just kept thinking and thinking, 'what are we missing?' There's something missing from us. There's a big hole in our chests, so I wanted something to fill that hole. I wanted something to make me content. That's it. Yesterday, our religious observation reinforced my meditation on the subject. Everyone is uncertain. In this incomprehensible world, we want to be ordered around by someone else, and that's why we made God. The dual antagonism between God and Satan explains the world more easily. You see? That strong, simple story! I honestly was affected!

"Unfortunately, that God isn't suited for us because that God is incredibly frightening. As you can see from the illustrations in 'Awaken!'—he is incredibly realistic and not at all cute." Yamazaki picked up the pamphlet lying in the corner of the room and held it out to me.

"Please, look at the special feature for June, 'Guardian Angels: They Are Always Protecting You.' In their religion, angels look like this." Yamazaki had opened to a page featuring a realistic illustration of a muscular man with wings on his back.

Yamazaki ripped the pamphlet into pieces. "I don't need an angel like this!" he screamed. "What is he, some kind of bodybuilder? When you say 'angel,' I think of something more, you know, beautiful and moe moe and loli loli…"

Many, many memories of erotic games where an angelic girl appeared as the heroine flashed through my mind.

"That's right! Don't you see, Satou? Now is the exact time for religious reform!"

I was still speechless.

"Our object of worship is this Rurirurі doll! And I am the founder of the sect!"

I gently tapped Yamazaki on the shoulder.

Shaking off my hand, Yamazaki continued ranting. "Those who believe will be saved! We must make something we ourselves can believe in order to bring meaning to our lives! And the meaning will be how we live on with our incredible new religion!"

Stalking around and around the room, he raised his fists, howling. He was screaming about anything that came to mind.

Eventually, Yamazaki ended up clinging pathetically to the life-sized doll. "I can't keep living like this," he whispered. His eyes were open wide.

I made him some hot coffee. Yamazaki drank his coffee, tears in his eyes.

I, too, felt like crying.

"By the way, Yamazaki, what are you going to do with this doll?"

"I'm giving it to you, Satou. Do whatever you want with it."

Chapter 09

Days of the End

Part One

To a hikikomori, winter is painful because everything feels cold, frozen over, and lonely. To a hikikomori, spring is also painful because everyone is in a good mood and therefore enviable.

Summer, of course, is especially painful.

It was a summer loud with the sound of cicadas. From morning to night, they kept whining and whining. The summer was also cripplingly hot. Even if the air conditioner ran constantly, it remained hot. I didn't know if my air conditioner was wearing out or if this summer was just especially hot. Either way, I was thoroughly boiled.

Sometimes, I wanted to yell, "Whoever is responsible, show yourself!" I didn't even have the energy to do it, though. The summer heat had worn me down completely. My appetite was depressed, and my

nerves were exhausted. No matter how much Lipovitan D[27] I swigged, my weariness was impossible to dispel.

Only my next door neighbor was energetic. He unabashedly made noise. From early morning until the middle of the night, anime songs rang out at loud volumes. He said that recently, he needed only four hours of sleep a day. He was working hard on his creative projects, with the help of anime songs. Bloodshot eyes flashing, he vigorously applied himself to these meaningless activities.

One day, Yamazaki said, "I've finally gotten through a big part of my game."

"Oh, really?"

"Tomorrow, I'm going to start making a bomb."

"What?"

Without answering Yamazaki silently gnawed on some white bread. It was a pretty half-assed breakfast. As I wasn't as lazy as he was, I properly toasted my bread and quickly fried an egg.

"Like I told you before, don't take food out of other people's fridges without permission."

I pretended not to know what he was talking about.

Misaki was wearing long sleeves even though it was summer. She was in a good mood, though.

"This is so fun, so fun, so fun," she said. She really did seem to be having fun. She was swinging happily on the swing set.

Of course, tonight felt tropical. It was so hot that I sweated even

without so much as speaking.

Misaki, however, seemed cool enough. Hair streaming behind her as she energetically swung back and forth, she said, "By the way, Satou, do you want to eat the leftover cat food?"

At some point, the park's black cat had gone missing. It had been quite a while since he had shown himself. Either he had been hit by a car and gone to heaven, or he'd taken off on a journey somewhere.

At any rate, I turned her down. "I don't need it."

"I stocked up on that cat food. Ah, what a waste."

Jumping down off the swing, Misaki stepped into the cozy sandbox next to the jungle gym. Picking up a green shovel that one of the neighborhood kids had left behind, she started making something in the sandbox.

I asked, "What is that?"

"A mountain."

She was right. It certainly was a mountain. Set in the middle of the sandbox, it was a sharply peaked mountain. It angled steeply, like Mount Fuji drawn by Hokusai,[28] thus looking as though the slightest vibration would make it crumble. But the sand mountain soon was perfectly complete. It was wonderful work, using sand wet with the evening dew.

Clapping her hands to brush off the sand, Misaki circled the mountain once. She looked expectantly at me. I said, "It's a nice mountain."

A little smile on her face, Misaki shouted, "Yaaah!" and aimed a forward kick at the mountain. "Things with shape will one day fall apart."

"That's right." I nodded.

There was actually a huge variety to the books Misaki pulled out of her backpack, night after night. She apparently borrowed them en masse once a week from the library. There were novels, poetry collections, practical guides, and reference books. Misaki read books of all different shapes and sizes, and then she would read them to me.

"Well then, the text for tonight is *The Last Words of Famous People*. Its title refers to the words that exemplary people leave behind at the moment of their deaths…"

Refers to…?

"Let's think about what life is!" she cried.

It was a dramatic line, and I was done in by Misaki's ability to make such grand, unusual declarations with an utterly normal expression. Then again, seen from another perspective—well, compared to yesterday's topic of "Let's think about what it means to live," it wasn't that big a deal.

Regaining my composure, I urged her to continue, and Misaki immediately started reading the text aloud.

The book collected the last words of famous people from all around the world, from ancient times to modern days. I listened quietly and respectfully. As she read from the book, however, Misaki seemed to grow bored with it, and her theme changed along the way.

"'More light…' Well then, whose words could these be?"

What, a quiz?!

"Three… Two… One… Time's up! The answer is Goethe. Well, that line is too cool, isn't it? I think that Mr. Goethe must have thought it up far, far ahead of time."

"M-maybe he did."

"Okay then, next question. 'Mikka Tororo[29] was delicious.'"

I knew this one. "It's the marathon runner Kokichi Tsuburaya's death note."

"Ping pong, ping pong![30] That's right! It's amazing you knew that."

I couldn't really brag about knowing famous people's last words, but Misaki praised me anyway. She sounded oddly taken with the contents of that death note, "Mikka Tororo… this is like some kind of joke, isn't it?"

"Conversely, that might be why people are struck by it."

"I see. That really clears things up for me," she said, nodding repeatedly. "Tsuburaya, the runner, apparently went home to the countryside right before he died. Then, he ate grated yam with his mother and father, it says."

"Hm."

"I guess everyone wants to return to their hometowns before they die, after all."

"Now that you mention it, Misaki, are you from this city?"

"No, I'm not. The north star is in that direction… so I'm probably from over there." Misaki pointed in a north-by-northwest direction.

She said the name of a town I didn't know and explained that it was a small town on the Sea of Japan, with a population of five thousand. According to her, it supposedly had a beautiful cape, but that cape had become a somewhat notorious spot for suicides.

"Ever since some famous person jumped off its cliff during the Meiji era, it's like it's become a Mecca for suicides. They say that so many people either jumped deliberately or slipped and fell accidentally that they had to construct safety barriers to prevent further incidents. When I was little, I didn't know anything about that and was always, playing on those bluffs. One day, I saw a strange woman there."

Misaki continued, "She was by the cliff's edge, on the high cape. It was a beautiful early evening and the sky was a bright red. The woman, too, was beautiful."

"And?"

"I took my eyes off her for just a moment, and she vanished. Even now, I sometimes see her in my dreams. It might have just been a dream to begin with, though. I mean, she had a really cheerful smile on her healthy-looking face. Alone, she stared at the ocean and late-afternoon sun. And then, in that one short instant, as I glanced away, she disappeared. A strange story, isn't it?"

It was a strange story.

"What could have happened? I think she should have at least left a suicide note—maybe about grated yam or something," I joked, trying to lighten the mood.

"I want to eat some grated yam."

"It makes you itchy."

"Yeah." She nodded.

"It's delicious, though, isn't it?"

The conversation had begun to stray. I, too, was exhausted, after all. But Misaki was laughing. "Ah, how fun, how happy. You think so, don't you, Satou?"

"Sure."

"We're coming to the end. The last day of the project is approaching." Misaki returned the book to her bag. "I've given all these helpful lectures, Satou, so you should be just about ready to become a model adult, right?"

Standing up from the bench, she said, "You understand now, don't you? Why you've become a worthless person? Why you've become a hikikomori? You should understand by this point."

I didn't answer.

"If you think about it properly, you should definitely understand."

Still seated on the bench, I looked up at her. The park was so dark that only her silhouette was illuminated. I couldn't see the expression on her face.

"I'm nearly out of time. I can't cause any more trouble for my aunt and uncle, so I'm going to leave town."

Her tone was absolutely casual, so I listened to her calmly.

"Where are you going?"

"A city… someplace where there are lots of people; someplace where no one knows me; someplace where I don't know anyone. That's why, by the time I go, Satou… Satou, you have to become an outstanding person."

I couldn't tell where the discussion was going; then again, she was a girl who said terribly unreasonable things.

Dazed, I shook my head from side to side.

"That won't change anything," said Misaki.

"Okay, I understand. I'm fine now." All I could do, at that point, was try to convince her of her success. "No, because of you, I really have been

reborn. You should rest assured of that and start a life of your own in a new city."

She still seemed somehow dissatisfied.

In an optimistic tone, I said, "Thank you! I owe you my life. Oh, that's true. Want to take my stereo with you? It's a necessity for living alone. If you want it, I'll give it to you as a present…"

"That isn't what I mean."

"It isn't what you mean?"

I waited patiently for her to continue, but Misaki turned her back on me without saying anything else.

I stood up, too. "Well then, goodbye."

I started walking toward my apartment; as I did, Misaki called out. "No! Wait a second!"

"What?"

"Let's go on a date. It'll be your graduation exam to test whether you really have become an outstanding, socially adept person, Satou. Meet me at the station, Sunday at noon. And we're definitely going even if it rains!"

With this defiant declaration, Misaki quickly strode away.

Meanwhile, Yamazaki really was making a bomb. He had gotten hold of a bomb recipe from the Internet and was really, truly manufacturing a bomb.

First, he needed to make black gunpowder. The history of black gunpowder went way back into the distant past. For example, it was

used during the Genkou period of Mongolian invasions[31]; and the weapon called the *tetsuhou*,[32] which surprised the samurai, also used black gunpowder. Despite being an extremely primitive compound of potassium nitrate, sulfur, and coal, its force is tremendous. They say that when used in an enclosed space, black gunpowder generates enough power to break all the windows on an average car and instantly kill the people inside.

"What are you going to use a bomb for?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? I'm going to blow up something!"

Well, yeah, that was true. It was, indeed, obvious. There was no other use for a bomb.

"I meant, what are you going to blow up? That's what I wanted to ask you."

"My enemies."

"Who are your enemies?"

"Villains. I'm going to get those villains with my revolutionary bomb."

"I see. Well, who are the villains?"

"Like, politicians or something."

"Do you even know the name of the current prime minister?"

Yamazaki grew silent and went back to his work. Before long, he'd completed the black gunpowder and the airtight iron pipe. His detonator, which used an analog clock, also was finished. The only thing left was to attach the detonator to the pipe, and then he could set it off at any time.

"Yay, I'm done! I'm a fighter! I'm a revolutionary!" Yamazaki was in high spirits. "They'll all be blown up! I'll kill all the villains!"

He was in high spirits, but he was also entirely self-aware.

"Ah, that was fun," he concluded.

In the end, though, the bomb didn't blow up any villains.

To start with, we didn't know where to find any villains. Because there was nothing we could do about that, we tried to blow up the neighborhood park on Saturday night. So no one would see us, we crawled deep into the brush to set the detonator. The bomb actually did explode, but it was more a whimper than a bang.

It was a sad story.

Amid these distractions, Sunday arrived. As I had promised, I met Misaki in front of the station. We had our date, and I returned to my apartment.

I slept all night. When I awoke, it was morning. I had nothing to do and was bored. I decided to try ingesting my entire stash of stockpiled drugs. I started having a good time. Everything became pleasurable. I laughed.

Part Two

In general, drugs can be classified into one of three large categories: uppers, downers, and psychedelics. Uppers are drugs that make you energetic. Cocaine and stimulants are famous uppers. Downers are drugs like heroin, which make you sluggish. I'd never tried them, so I didn't know firsthand, but it seemed that taking them would feel really, really good. And psychedelics are hallucinogens. LSD and magic

mushrooms represent that category.

For the most part, I really preferred legal hallucinogens. They had few side effects—unlike uppers and downers—and more than that, they were easy to get because they were legal.

On the day after my date, I took drugs again. I decided to take a rather aggressive approach.

First, I set the groundwork with thirty milligrams of AMT. AMT is an antidepressant that was studied by Russian scientists. After they discovered that a large dose could cause hallucinogenic effects, it was prohibited for medical use. Still, it was originally just an antidepressant. After taking it, for the first two hours, a person would be plagued with terrible nausea; once that was over, however, it became entirely pleasurable. It also happened to be the best thing ever for combating bad trips.

Next, I boiled down the seeds of a harmal plant and drank the yellow layer of liquid that floated to the top. Harmal, a plant I think is in the goathead family, originated in Tibet and contains the Indole-type psychedelic components harmine and harmaline. Using it by itself doesn't produce any real effect; in combination with other hallucinogens like magic mushrooms or DMT, though, the effects are amplified dozens of times over. That's the *Ayahuasca* method. As harmal is an MAO inhibitor, it could be life-threatening if ingested with cheese or other dairy products; but as long as those foods are avoided, it shouldn't cause any problems.

Well, my real opportunity had arrived. My consciousness already was dimming, and the edges of my vision wavered wildly—but here, my true trip would begin. I would keep going and going!

Grinding five grams of dried magic mushroom with a mortar and pestle, I washed the powder down with a single gulp of orange juice. On top of that, I screwed up my courage and ingested a ten-milligram crystal of 5-MeO-DMT. DMT is a drug containing only the effective components of hallucinogenic plants like chacropanga, which natives of the Amazon use in their Ayahuasca ceremonies. Though legal, this drug is reputedly one of the strongest anyone can find. According to one theory, the hallucinogenic effects are more than one hundred times more powerful than those of LSD. It's truly the ultimate psychedelic.

In just one second, I had become paralyzed! The drugs had taken effect!

The Satou Special—my wonderful, ultimate method, devised through research and trial-and-error—was complete.

By effectively combining four types of drugs into a single cocktail, I was promised the ultimate trip, one that even illegal drugs couldn't touch. With a hard thrust, as if riding a rocket ship, I was shot into the far reaches of outer space. Time stopped entirely. Space began to warp thoroughly. My physical body disappeared.

"This is no good, Satou. I found out something terrible! I've had an epiphany!" Yamazaki declared. "This is really, really bad!"

I tried to say something but my mouth wouldn't work.

Yamazaki was getting agitated. "Are you listening? Listen closely: This is a really bad thing!"

As there was nothing else I could do, I listened closely.

Pulling himself to his full height and wearing the largest grin imaginable, Yamazaki said, "I was able to logically prove that I am the monotheistic God who created the cosmos!"

I died.

Then, I came back to life.

"Please watch, and I'll clean up your room now, using my superpowers." Yamazaki pointed his finger at the rubbish scattered about the floor and screamed, "Move!"

Naturally, the rubbish did not so much as twitch.

"Hey! I'm ordering you! Why are you resisting me?" Yamazaki fumed.

Observing this situation, I felt something rise up inside of me. It was a strange sensation, bubbling up from the very depths of my body. Folding my arms, I thought carefully about this feeling. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I realized what it was. *I know, this is…*

It was nausea! I was attacked by violent nausea. I tried to dash to the bathroom, but the path there was challenging. My legs wouldn't move forward. The hall seemed to have stretched into a fifteen hundred foot tunnel. The bathroom was so far away. Would I make it? Could I get to the bathroom before spraying-vomit everywhere?

I'll be fine. Calm down.

Yamazaki had just said it. He had said, "I am God."

But I knew. I knew that his words were completely mistaken. How did I know? Because *I* was God! I had confirmed that truth just a moment earlier, using a thoroughly logical thought process.

I would definitely make it in time. *I am God. I will make it to the bathroom in time.*

I made it.

Prostrating myself before the toilet, I threw up. Afterward, I felt much better. Then, I became energetic. I was enjoying myself. Skipping slowly back into the room, I found Yamazaki squatting there, still grinning.

"It's no good. Elementary students are no good." Muttering under his breath, he looked like he was thinking of something criminal.

For some reason, his situation triggered an extreme sense of déjà vu. *This sort of thing has happened before, hasn't it…?* While I thought about it, ten consecutive aggressive feelings of déjà vu suddenly hit me. Everything I was looking at had happened before.

I decided to engage Yamazaki in a discussion about this sensation. After a moment, I became unsure what was really going on. "Huh, have we had this discussion before?"

"What are you saying, Satou? I have no idea what—"

"Wait just a second. Let me think carefully about it."

Lying face down on the floor, I thought as hard as I could. When I did, I was able to remember… I was a soldier from an ancient civilization several thousands of years ago, who had transmigrated through time and space to come to this world. Naturally, I decided to keep this revelation from Yamazaki. It was a gravely important secret, after all.

After a little while passed, Yamazaki broke in on my thoughts. "You should breathe. You're dying."

I breathed. I came back to life. Sincerely thanking Yamazaki, I pondered the way that the world was wrapped in love. I bowed my head to say, "thank you, thank you."

However, as if to balance out my return to life, Yamazaki abruptly acted like he was in extreme physical distress. Clutching his throat, he rolled about on the floor, writhing in agony. When I asked, "What's wrong?" he just uttered an inhuman cry and, without speaking, continued convulsing.

Finally, he picked up a notebook and ballpoint pen in order to communicate the problem to me. Hands shaking, he wrote something down in the notebook.

Taking my time, I carefully deciphered his letters: "I forgot how to use my voice."

Yamazaki gripped his throat, looking miserable. I whacked his back as hard as I could.

"Ouch!" he said, and then he gave me a thumbs-up. His broad smile returned.

I decided it was time for us to head out. It was already the middle of the night, so I wasn't afraid that we'd be seen by the police or any neighbors.

We headed toward the neighborhood park. Yamazaki was walking like a robot. Maybe he really was a robot. In the end, could I have such thoughts and also be human? I found the idea a little mysterious.

At that point, I tried banging my head against the streetlamp in the park. This was bad: It didn't hurt. It didn't hurt at all. *I am actually a robot…*

Thus, I discovered a new truth.

Be that as it may, the park at night was wonderful. Though the streetlamps were the only light source, the park shone and glowed like a photograph taken using a long exposure. The park was full of life.

Everything there pulsed with life: the gentle creaking of the old bench, the steady breathing of massive trees lining the road, the dynamic twists of the branches and leaves. All this, every last thing, was alive.

While I was transfixed by the scene, Yamazaki said, "I can hear music."

I heard it, too. From somewhere in the park, inexplicably beautiful music was playing.

We were looking for the music's source—pushing our way through the grass, shoving our heads under the bench, combing the park for quite a while—when, at last, we found a speaker. It was buried in the roots of the largest tree by the road.

However, it was strange. We didn't really understand the speaker's mechanism. Yamazaki and I considered it together. We concluded that the speaker was a "white hole," which pushed out matter rather than sucking it in.

We walked into the white hole and emerged near a beautiful lake. Yamazaki slowly shed his clothing and dove headfirst into the lake. However… "Argh! It's a sandbox!"

It seemed that the lake was, in reality, just a plain old sandbox. It really had looked like a lake to me. I decided that I couldn't trust what Yamazaki told me.

In any event, it felt as if time had been playing tricks on us. First, we were going back in time, and then we were headed forward into the future. I thought about this. When could "now" possibly be?

"Hey, Yamazaki. What day of the week is today?"

There was no answer. It seemed as though he had gone back home already.

Having grown sad, I climbed into the brush, picking the spot where we had detonated Saturday night's bomb.

In the brush were Yamazaki and myself—from three days ago!

"Okay, it will explode after three minutes. Please, back far away from it."

Me, myself, and Yamazaki retreated.

"I wanted to be a revolutionary, but that dream didn't come true, I wanted to be a soldier, but that dream didn't come true. My father it dying, and then I'll have no choice but to go home. I wonder whose fault that is. I think there's some evildoer out there somewhere. I wanted to blow him up, like in a Hollywood movie, with this bomb. You know…"

As I could see only our backs, there was no way for me to check Yamazaki's expression as he said that. But I already knew.

"Huh? Three minutes already have passed, but it didn't explode." Yamazaki walked over in the direction of the bomb. As he did, I heard a loud bang, and Yamazaki fell over.

I knew. I knew that he had been crying. "This has no force at all. This bomb I worked so hard to make only has the power of a few firecrackers. This is no good. I'm going back home. See you."

And then, he went back home to the countryside.

When I returned to my apartment, only the life-sized anime doll that Yamazaki had left was waiting for me. She asked, "Aren't you lonely?"

"No, I'm not lonely…"

On that warm, sunny day, I had gone on the date with Misaki. It unfolded as wholesomely as a date between middle school kids in the countryside would have.

We took the train into the city. There were large crowds, so we nearly lost sight of each other. Neither of us owned a cell phone; so, if we were separated even once, it would be the end of everything. In this large city, we never would be able to find each other again. We had to be careful.

Even so, Misaki was wandering heedlessly. I, too, was mostly just plodding along. "Where should we go?" I asked.

"Somewhere."

"What about lunch?"

"We just ate together, didn't we?"

"What about a movie?"

"Okay."

We watched a movie. It was an astounding Hollywood action flick. Someone was being blown away by bombs, and he swung his arms around in circles as he floated high up into the sky. Then, he died. I longed to be like him.

"That was very interesting. Do you think I should buy the informational pamphlet?"[33]

Misaki was blown away by the thousand-yen price tag, though, so she didn't end up buying it. "Why are they so expensive?!"

"That's the price they usually are, isn't it?"

"Hm, really?" It seemed that she hadn't known.

When we exited the movie theater, we were once again at a loss over what to do.

"Where should we go?"

"Somewhere."

"What about lunch?"

"We just ate, didn't we?"

We kept walking aimlessly. We had no place to go, and I didn't know what to do. Misaki felt the same way, and we both were troubled by it.

Eventually, we arrived at a needlessly large city park. There were a lot of people there, of course—and in the very center was a large fountain. Pigeons fluttered around us.

Seated on a bench, I was dazed. We chatted amiably until sunset. Finally, we ran out of conversation topics; when only our restless silence remained, Misaki pulled her secret notebook from her bag.

"Let's walk toward our dreams!"

I responded, "It doesn't matter anymore. This stuff isn't going to change anything."

"Don't say such negative things."

"Even if I try to believe these lies, in the end, there's nothing I'd be able to do."

"Actually, they've made me quite normal."

"What part of you?"

"You don't think I seem normal?" she asked.

"You're strange," I stated. "You've always been strange. Ever since I first saw you, I thought you seemed rather off."

"Really…"

We both grew silent.

In front of us, a pigeon waddled by. Misaki tried to catch it. Naturally, the pigeon escaped. She repeated her attempt several times; after they all failed, she simply stared at the fountain in front of us.

Then, she said, "Satou, when it comes to you and me, and the idea of which of us is more worthless, you must be more worthless then I am, right?"

I agreed with her completely.

"Well, that's why. That's why you were selected for my project, Satou."

It seemed she had finally decided she wanted to discuss the heart of the matter. At this point, though, it really didn't make any difference, as nothing was going to change. At least, that was my conviction.

Misaki was smiling a fake smile that would have made anyone seeing it nervous. It was an uncertain, manufactured smile that touched only her lips, unnaturally pulling them upward.

She began, "The initial premise is that there's no way anyone could end up liking someone like me."

"You really think that?"

"It's been like that since I was born. It was so bad that my mother and father hated me, and it was even worse with other people."

I didn't have any response.

"My uncle and aunt took me in, but I just create problems for them, too. Their relationship is getting worse, and they say they want to divorce soon. It's all my fault, and I'm really sorry about it."

"You're just thinking about it too much."

"No, I'm not," she said. "I probably was born useless, and normal

people wont have anything to do with me. Eventually, everyone starts hating me and, because of me, everyone starts feeling bad. I have actual evidence that what I'm saying is true."

Misaki rolled up her sleeves. Holding out her arms, she made me look at them. Many, many sad scars from old burns marred her white skin.

"It was my second father. I don't even remember his face. He drank continuously. While he drank, his mood would improve—but even when he was in a good mood, he always was getting angry at me, burning me with cigarettes." She said all this, her bright smile unwavering.

"I was even scared of school and couldn't go. Of course, I was scared… There was no way I could fit in with everyone else. I was terrified. Because if they were normal people, they were absolutely sure to start hating someone like me."

"What about the people at your church?"

"Those are good people. Everyone there is pretty normal, and they're working their hardest. So, of course, they won't have anything to do with me."

I didn't say anything.

"Finally, I was able to find someone more worthless than I was: A really worthless person. A totally worthless person—the kind you can't find just anywhere. Someone who can't look people in the eye when speaking, who is unbearably afraid of others. Someone who lives among the dregs of society, a person whom even I could look down on."

"Who was it?"

"Satou." Her words were exactly what I expected.

Then, Misaki pulled a sheet of scrap paper from her bag and handed it to me. It was the second contract.

I felt unsure what I should do. The sun was nearly beneath the horizon, and the number of people walking around the park had shrunk considerably.

Misaki handed me a marker and a vermilion ink pad,[34] saying, "A thumb print will be fine.

"After all, someone like you, Satou, might start liking me, right?" she asked. "I mean, you're even more worthless than I am, after all. As I've been carrying out this plan for such a long time, you should be my prisoner by now, right? Please, be nice to me, and I'll be nice to you, too."

"No. This won't work."

"Why?"

"It's no use. Nothing's changed. This agreement just makes everything more painful. On top of that, it's too empty." I got up and returned the marker and ink.

I tried to be enthusiastic. "You'll be fine, Misaki! This is just a momentary lapse of confidence. Have a rubdown with a dry towel, and train your mind and body! If you do that, these stupid thoughts will disappear. A cute girl like you will be able to have a great life! Don't look down! Look up, and you'll be okay!"

Then, I ran away.

The contents of the contract had seared themselves into my brain.

Contract Regarding Mutual Support for Worthless and Lonely People

Defining Satou Tatsuhiro as party A and Misaki Nakahara as party B, the two parties agree to the following:

A will not start to hate B.

In fact, A will start to like B.

A will never change mind.

A will never have a change of heart.

When one party is lonely, the other always will be at his or her side.

As B is always lonely, basically A always will be at B's side.

If we do this, I think our lives probably will move in a good direction.

I think the painful times will go away.

If you break this contract, the penalty is ten million yen.

"Hey! Aren't you lonely?" Misaki called out.

Turning around, I answered in a loud voice, "No, I'm not lonely."

"Well, I'm lonely!"

"I'm not.

"Liar."

"I'm not lying," I said." I'm the strongest hikikomori in the world, so I can go on living by myself. Pain doesn't mean anything to me. Misaki, you, should stop relying on other people, too. In the end, everyone is

alone. Being alone is best. I mean, it's true, isn't it? In the end, you'll be absolutely alone; therefore, being alone is natural. If you accept that, nothing bad can happen. That's why I shut myself away in my six-mat, one-room apartment."

"Aren't you lonely?"

"I'm not lonely?"

"Aren't you *lonely*?"

"I'm *not* lonely."

"Liar." Someone spoke in a low, muffled voice.

I turned around to look behind me.

I found myself standing in the middle of my six-mat, one-room apartment. In the corner, I sat hugging my legs to my chest, melting into the deep darkness.

It was night, and I couldn't see, hear, or do anything. Despite the fact that it was summer, this six-mat, one-room apartment, devoid of furniture or anything else, was cold. A dark and terrible chill filled the isolated space. I held my head and trembled.

I said, "I'm lonely."

"I'm not lonely."

"Liar."

"I'm not lying."

"I'm so lonely."

"I am lonely!"

The quivering, shaking, shivering me was clack-clack-clacking his teeth. The me standing in the middle of the room watched this. I thought I'd gone crazy. But I wasn't crazy.

There were only two things that I understood: I was alone, and I was

incredibly lonely. I didn't want to be in this state. I didn't want to be lonely.

"Anyway," I screamed, "that's why!"

I kept shouting, "Being lonely is natural! Of course, I hate being lonely! That's exactly why I shut myself off from the world, why I lock myself away. Thinking about it for the long term, this is the best solution. You understand, right? Hey! You understand me, right?"

There was no answer.

"Don't you understand? Listen carefully to what I'm saying. If you do, you'll get it. You can grasp this easily. In short… in short, I shut myself in because I'm lonely. Because I don't want to face any more loneliness, I shut myself away. Hey, do you understand? That's the answer!"

There was no reply.

"I'm greedier than anyone. I don't want some half-assed happiness I don't need some partial warmth. I want a happiness that goes on forever. That's impossible, though! I don't know why it is, but in this world, some interference is sure to come. Important things break right away. I've been alive for twenty-two years, and I know at least this much. It doesn't matter what the thing is, but it will break. That's why, from the beginning, it's better not to need anything."

That's right! You should learn this truth, too, Misaki. If you do, you won't come up with more ridiculous plans. You'll stop looking to people like me for help.

She was terribly stupid. She was clinging to a horrifyingly enormous despair. I was appalled by the loneliness that caused her to seek help from a piece of human trash like me. I cursed the misfortune that had

fallen upon her. I cursed the unreasonable fact that children couldn't choose their parents. I wanted a cheerful girl like her to live a strong, healthy life.

Please, do your best, somewhere. I'm all right. I'll be fine on my own. It's best for me to be alone. I'll live alone and die alone.

Even still, I had hope. I had hope. . . .

Look, just over there—it's shining, pale, and gentle.

It was my hometown, the one that drew forth nostalgic, bittersweet tears. Autumn plains that continued forever. Memories from long ago. The eternally fleeting glances from giggling little girls. The peace of the black cat, hit by a car. There was no longer anything painful or difficult anywhere. I was fine now.

"That's right. You are now," said a little girl.

The life-sized anime doll, which Yamazaki had left behind as a present, stared at me. She was an angel. She started to move, and she guided me forward.

We traveled to a faraway planet. It was beautiful: a blue sky with white clouds, the cool wind blowing across a spring field that stretched into the distance. We stood in the middle of the field, and the girl picked one pure white flower and held it up in front of me.

With her slender fingers, she grasped a petal and pulled it out. "Life."

Then, she pulled out another petal. "Death."

She was telling a flower fortune.

"Life… Death… Life… Death… Life… Death… Life… Death."

The last petal fluttered to the ground.

The girl smiled gently.

Chapter 10

Dive

Part One

Summer ended. I'd depleted my living expenses. I had no money left for food, so I decided to try sleeping to conserve energy. I would be awake for five hours, and then I'd sleep for fifteen. I tried living on that schedule.

For the first three days, I didn't really have any problem fasting. At worst, my stomach hurt a little bit. By the time the fourth day rolled around, though, I couldn't think of anything but food. *I want to eat ramen. I want to eat curry and rice.* Regardless of my will, my body seriously wanted calories. This craving was impossible to fight.

Finally, on the fifth day of fasting, I left the apartment. Spending my last few hundred yen to buy a pastry and another part-time job magazine, I decided to start doing physical work that very day.

Physical day labor… I mastered the work surprisingly easily, bringing supplies into event halls, helping with moving and the like.

Once in a while, I made a mistake and got punched by one of the higher-ups; even so, the work was refreshing. The rougher I treated my body, the more and more empty my head became. For the first time in several years, I could go to sleep and wake up feeling refreshed.

Given all my credit card debt, I worked night and day for the first month. After registering with a temporary agency, I was able to get daily work. Once I'd accumulated a degree of wiggle room in my savings, I immediately reduced the amount of work I was doing. I decided to work for about half a month at a time, then staying holed up for the second half. As long as I could make about one hundred thousand yen a month, I could actually maintain a rather pleasant life.

Whenever possible, I tried to work nights. Nighttime traffic control was the best job. To be a security guard, you needed to get registered by taking a four-day legal training course; once you finished that, however, no other work was easier.

In the middle of the night, I waved the glowing red guide stick back and forth at construction sites far from human habitation. The only thing I could hear all night long was the echo of construction equipment operating behind me. On the nights when I worked as a guard, I was alone. Sometimes a car would pass, but all I had to do was wave the guide stick appropriately and caution, "Look out, slow down."

Because I almost never needed to speak to others while working, I felt the same as when I holed up in my apartment. I just relied on my conditioned reflexes to wave the guide stick, back and forth, back and forth. The night wind was a bit chilly, but my pay for this was ten

thousand yen per night, counting my travel fare.

I'd work, and then I'd shut myself away—earn my living expenses, and then shut myself away. This lifestyle continued and, with frightening speed, time went by. While I kept working, it turned to winter.

It was the winter of my fifth year as a hikikomori. This year felt thoroughly cold—probably because I had previously sold off my kotatsu to the secondhand shop. Even covered head to toe with a blanket, I still was freezing, always shivering uncontrollably. At that point, in place of a body warmer, I decided to try using the laptop computer, which Yamazaki had left behind when he moved.

"It's an off-brand Pentium 66 MHz notebook computer. I didn't want to have to carry it, so I was going to throw it away. But seeing as I have it, I'll give it to you, Satou," he'd said.

He'd left with those words.

I set the laptop on my stomach and turned on the power. A noisy whirring indicated that it was operating, and an anime wallpaper appeared on the liquid crystal screen. Being an older machine, it generated an amazing amount of heat. Soon, I warmed up and began to grow sleepy.

Just then, I recognized a familiar icon displayed on the computers desktop.

It looked like the executable file for the erotic game that Yamazaki had been making. Positioning the cursor on the file, I clicked to open it. The hard disk started groaning. After a long loading period, the game began.

I played it for several hours. And then, I understood… I understood

that this was a terrible, terrible game.

The genre was an RPG, but it was an extremely cheap RPG, with about one hundredth of the first *Dragon Quest*[35] game's content.

It wasn't an erotic game any longer, and the story was utterly ridiculous—basically, the concept was something along the lines of "a journey about love and youth taken by soldiers fighting against a giant, evil organization." The game told the story of an average young man who becomes a warrior to fight evil and protect the heroine. This wish-fulfillment scenario eventually bypassed the player, continuing meaninglessly on and on and on.

I was dumbfounded.

Come on, what idiot could have come up with such a stupid scenario?

It was me. I was the very person who had written the original outline for the story.

I grew sad. It was a bittersweet sadness, because I thoroughly understood the scenario of the game: Soldiers taking a stand against evil.

This had been our exact desire; we had wanted to fight an evil organization; we had wanted to fight villains. If a war had broken out, we would have joined the JSDF[36] right away and launched kamikaze attacks. That definitely would have been a meaningful way to live and an attractive way to die. Had there been villains in the world, we would have battled them. Fists raised in the air, we would have fought. There was no mistake about it.

There weren't any villains, though. The world was just complicated in various ways, and there weren't any obvious villains to be found. It was excruciating.

Our personal desires had become the framework for the game. As I

progressed farther into it, I realized that it actually had a wonderful story. It was a simple, beautiful story. Right now, in fact, the main character, fighting an enormously powerful enemy, vowed to protect the heroine.

"I'll protect your life!" Heedless of his own safety, he prepared to challenge the gigantic enemy and the final battle began. I was nearing the end of the game.

There were three battle commands: "attack," "defend," and "special attack." No matter how much I attacked the last boss, I couldn't do any damage. Naturally, just trying to defend myself didn't help, either. Finally, I had no choice but to use the special attack—the final death blow. Using my own life energy, I sacrificed myself in order to deal a mortal wound to the enemy. There was no other way to defeat the final boss. So, the hero of the game held his "Revolutionary Bomb" in his right hand and went to perform his special attack.

However, at the very, very end—at the exact second the hero executed his special attack on the final boss—the game suddenly froze! The game window closed, and the text editor started up. Yamazaki apparently had left a letter that seemed like an excuse.

"There really isn't any other way to destroy the huge, evil organization than to use your special attack. You can gain victory only if you choose death for yourself because the giant, evil organization actually is made up of our entire world. Because the second you choose death, the world disappears into nothingness, the evil organization, too, disappears into nothingness. Then, peace will come to you. Still, I didn't blow my own head off with a bomb. That was my choice. No, it definitely isn't that I just didn't want to go through the pain of drawing

the CG for the game ending or that I got downright tired of making a terrible game. Nothing like that…"

At first, I tried to smash the laptop. Then, I changed my mind. I had watched Yamazaki desperately work on this game, but the final shoddiness of it hit me pretty hard.

What in the world could he be doing right now? This question suddenly began to bother me, but I decided to try and forget it. I hadn't heard any news from him since he left, and I didn't feel like contacting him, either.

Those idiotic days from that period in my life had ended long ago.

Christmas came once again. The city lights twinkled.

The guide stick grasped in my right hand, too, lit up in the darkness. Tonight's work was traffic control in the parking lot of a new department store that had opened near the station. Because the entrances were equipped with fully automated ticket machines, I had absolutely nothing to do. When it got crowded, I tried helping out the machines; but each time, I just ended up swinging my stick back and forth.

There were no accidents, nothing happened, and Christmas Eve marched on in safety.

About an hour before the store closed, a car came by. The car itself was the sort of Japanese model found anywhere, with nothing special to note about it. However, because the interior lights were on, I recognized the girl sitting in the passenger seat. I saw her clearly.

Startled, I tried to push my cap down over my eyes as much as

possible. The car passed me without hesitation, so there hadn't been any recognition. But I felt that my high school acquaintance, sitting in the passenger seat, had looked my way, just for a second.

Of course, that, too, was just a delusion.

My shift ended, and I changed out of my uniform and put the guide stick and helmet into my bag. Swaying back and forth on one of the last trains of the night, I headed toward my apartment. On the way, I stopped by a convenience store to buy alcohol and the like.

I decided I should try getting into the Christmas spirit. Walking up the steep road that led to my apartment, I drank a beer. I hadn't had alcohol in a while, so it took effect quickly. Somewhat shakily, I slowly hiked up the long, sloping path. In the distance, an ambulance's siren pierced the otherwise quiet night. I finished my second beer.

Merry Christmas.

By the time I passed the park, my gait had been reduced to a drunken stumble. Walking carefully, I could avoid swaying drastically, but I figured I might as well just walk like a drunk. I increased my pace and wobbled from telephone pole to telephone pole. I tripped over a stone and almost fell. I staggered and was about to collapse in the middle of the road when, right in front of me, an ambulance rushed past.

I had almost been run over!

I thought perhaps I should complain in a loud, drunken voice, "You id—"

I stopped in mid-sentence.

The ambulance had pulled up in front of Misaki's house. Her uncle dashed out of the front door. He yelled to one of the paramedics as they ran into the house, carrying a stretcher. A short while later, they carried

the stretcher back through the front door. Misaki was limp.

I watched as Misaki, her aunt, and her uncle sped away in the ambulance at a breakneck speed.

Part Two

It was almost New Year's Eve. One afternoon, I loitered in front of the large hospital at the edge of town. This was where Misaki had been admitted.

Earlier that morning, I had headed down to the manga café near the station and had gotten the information from her exhausted uncle.

"Anyway, I'm so sorry." Her uncle apologized to me for no reason. "We thought she was doing better. She'd been much calmer since quitting school and had seemed really happy recently. I wonder if maybe that was because of what she'd planned. By the way, how do you know Misaki?"

"We're sort of acquaintances," I answered. I retreated from the manga café and had headed straight for the hospital, but…

I had been hanging out in the courtyard for nearly two hours. Among the visitors and patients out for strolls, I was pacing back and forth on the path from the main gate to the front entrance.

Misaki was in a private, fourth-floor room on the open psychiatric ward. Apparently, she'd swallowed a bunch of sleeping pills. It was nearly a fatal dose; had they arrived much later, it might have been too late.

It was uncertain where Misaki had obtained the sleeping pills, but they may have been from the neighborhood psychiatrist. But to have amassed enough pills for an effective suicide attempt, she must have been going there for quite for a while. That meant that this attempt clearly had been intentional. Misaki had planned her death for a long time.

What in the world did I intend to do, showing up unannounced? I couldn't make anything better for her.

Should I cry saying something like, "Don't die!"… ?

Should I try yelling something like, "You still have tomorrow!"… ?

Misaki had written numerous, similar clichés in her secret notebook. But they hadn't helped her, so she'd tried to overdose on sleeping pills.

In short, there was nothing I could do for her. It might even be better for me to avoid showing my face. She probably would feel even emptier, getting a hospital visit from a pathetic hikikomori.

When I thought about the situation that way, I'd decide to go home; but at the hospital gate, my feet would stop on their own. Once more, I turned back toward the front entrance and repeated the entire cycle.

My thoughts were looping around. If this kept up, it looked like I would just keep walking to and fro until nightfall. I couldn't make up my mind.

Finally, screwing up my courage, I dashed into the hospital before I could change my mind again. I got a visitor's badge at the front desk, pinned it to my chest, and headed up to the fourth floor.

The entire fourth floor was an open psychiatric ward. At first glance, it seemed no different from a normal hospital. I'd thought that a psychiatric ward would be full of straitjackets, electroshock equipment, and lobotomy laboratories. However, this open ward was clean and

cheerful; it seemed like an ordinary part of the hospital.

Or so I thought. When I noticed that an older woman of around sixty, apparently a patient, had squatted down in the corner of the hallway, I quickly headed for room 401.

In the far corner of the fourth-floor hall, a nameplate identified Misaki's room: "Misaki Nakahara," it said.

There was no mistake. This was the room.

I knocked softly.

There was no answer.

I tried knocking again, a little harder; there was still no answer. However, my knocking seemed to have dislodged the door, though it might have been open partially to begin with.

"Misaki?" I peeked into the room.

She wasn't there.

Well, if she's not here, there's nothing I can do. I'll go home!

I decided to leave behind the fruit basket I had bought in the hospital gift shop. And I noticed someone had left a train schedule open on the shelf next to the bed. The schedule was annotated here and there in red ballpoint pen. Moving it aside, I put down the fruit basket.

As I did, a scrap of paper fluttered to the floor. I picked it up and read it: "*Mikka Tororo was delicious. Therefore, farewell, everyone.*"

Shoving the scrap of paper and the schedule into my coat pocket, I dashed out of the hospital and headed toward the station.

The sun had begun to set.

They should have put her on a closed ward with iron bars over the windows, not an open one where she could come and go freely. They should have put her in a straitjacket and pumped her full of medicine to make her happy. But because they hadn't, Misaki had left the hospital. She was heading back to the town where she'd been born. She was likely going there to die.

I remembered the discussion we'd had a good while ago:

"Tsuburaya, the runner, apparently went home to the countryside right before he died. Then, he ate grated yam with his mother and father, it says."

"Hm."

"I guess everyone wants to return to their hometown before they die, after all."

That was probably true. Misaki, too, must have started wanting to return to her hometown. She likely intended to dive into the sea from the tall, sheer cliffs at the cape, where she'd said she often played. It wasn't going to be that easy, though. Now that I had found her suicide note and the train schedule, her luck had run out.

As far as I could tell from looking at the notes marked on the schedule, Misaki had boarded the train only an hour or so before. If I chased after her, I should be able to make it in plenty of time. I knew where she was headed, and on top of that, I had money. If I used taxis for part of the trip, I might even reach the destination before Misaki. There wasn't any reason for me to worry.

On the night train, I opened a map, purchased at a bookstore along the way. I looked for that cape—the one where Misaki said she often played when she'd been little. *Here it is*. The map showed only one cape near her hometown, so this had to be it.

Misaki probably had boarded the train that had departed right before mine. Mixed in with people returning home for the year's end, she likely was heading for the town where she'd been born, toward the cape known as a famous suicide spot. However, she didn't know that I was following her.

I wouldn't let her escape. I was certain to catch up with her. On that point, at least, I wasn't worried. The problem lay elsewhere.

When I found Misaki, what should I say to her?

I understood her suffering, if only a little bit. It was just the very tip of her pain; even so, I could imagine it to some degree. She probably felt trapped, as though she'd run out of options. And her pain would never, ever disappear, not in her entire life.

Of course, that was natural. In a way, her pain was common to all mankind. It was an ordinary suffering. Everyone is troubled by similar feelings. I, too, was troubled by them.

Even if I keep living, there's nothing to be done. It's only pain.

Knowing that, could I stop her from jumping? Did I have the right to stop her? As a member of society, I probably should say something appropriate like, "Even so, keep living!" or "Stop whining!"

I understood all that.

While I was mulling over these things, the train arrived at it's destination.

Exiting the station, I found that the town was deserted. It was already the middle of the night; but even given the time, the area around the station was as silent as a ghost town. There was no sign of anyone on

the streets.

On top of that, it was snowing and really cold. As the town was located on the Sea of Japan, it was in something of a blizzard zone. I fastened shut the neck of my coat and headed toward the sole taxi in sight. The driver seemed surprised by a customer's arrival. The man, poised at the threshold of old age, looked like he'd been sleeping in his seat. Hurriedly, he wiped his eyes.

Getting into the warm car, I pointed at the map to show him my destination. The driver looked at me for confirmation, with an expression that said, "Are you serious?"

I nodded, and the car took off, causing the chains on the tires to clank.

"Sir, why would you want to go to a place like that so late at night?"

"Sightseeing. Please hurry."

About half an hour later, the taxi exited onto a hilly road that ran along the ocean shore. It headed straight up a steep hill. On the right, the pitch-black sea spread out. When we reached the top of the hill, the taxi stopped.

"This place actually has become quite a famous tourist spot, but there isn't anything here." The taxi driver spoke as though in apology.

I paid the fare and got out of the taxi.

"You don't really plan to… No, the construction is complete, so it should be fine." With that, the taxi driver pulled back onto the road.

I looked around. There really wasn't anything here. Or more accurately, it was so dark that I could barely see.

As the ocean was on my right side, I thought I would find the cliff if I headed in that direction, but only sparsely scattered streetlamps lit the

area. I felt terribly helpless. For the time being, I crossed the road and, climbing through the space between the guardrails, I set off on a snow-covered path.

Misaki had to be at the other end of this path. Stepping through the snow, which came up to my ankles, and taking care not to slip and fall, I continued down the path cut through the thick brush. With each step, the surrounding darkness grew deeper and deeper.

Before long, the light from the streetlamps no longer reached me, and I could hardly see anything at all. Then, the brush thinned abruptly. The path ended, and in front of my eyes stretched the coal-black sky and the Sea of Japan. That's right. I had made it to the very edge of the cape. It was too dark for me to see well, but the cliff was about thirty feet ahead. I finally had arrived. I had reached my destination!

But what about Misaki?

I looked around, but I couldn't see much. A large full moon floated in the night sky, but my eyes weren't used to the dark yet, so I couldn't make out anything but vague outlines. There seemed to be no sign of anyone anywhere. That was all I could tell.

What did this mean? Had I arrived first? Or had Misaki stopped somewhere along the way? Or could it be that…

My heart began pulsing violently, and my blood curdled.

No, no, it couldn't be. There was no way that she could have jumped before I even arrived, right? She'd be here shortly. Soon, Misaki would come walking down that path.

I stepped back and sat on a bench that faced the ocean. With my face turned expectantly toward the little path, I waited for Misaki.

An hour passed. Misaki didn't come. It began to seem as though she

wouldn't come down the path at all. I put my head in my hands. Without realizing it, I started talking to myself.

"Why?"

"'Why what?"

"Did I arrive too late?"

"No, you didn't."

"Misaki is…"

"You were off by only five minutes. Maybe you should be a detective."

I slowly turned my face to the right. Standing there was Misaki. She was wearing a black coat that blended with the darkness.

Perching on the edge of the bench, Misaki explained, "You finally said something. I didn't know what to do because you were silent for so long."

Part Three

A violent rage boiled up inside me. I felt as though she had made an ass out of me. Forcing those feelings back down inside, I said in as gentle a tone as possible, "Well then, let's go home! It's cold out here!"

"I don't want to."

What do you mean you don't want to?! You, ah crap, just stop making a fool out of me. I nearly started railing at her as hard as I could; but somehow, I was able to control the impulse.

I tried to remember a book I had read long ago called *The Psychology of Self-Injury*. It had theorized, "Those who try to commit suicide

actually want someone to save them. They want someone to listen to what they have to say, so try and listen to them with a kind demeanor, as gently as possible, without chiming in with any sort of negative comments."

Those seemed to be the key points.

I turned to Misaki as I fixed my collar. That was proof of my gentle attitude. Then, I said, "Don't die. Let's keep living!"

Misaki smiled. It was a derisive smile.

I wanted to tell her just how much trouble I had gone through to get all the way here; of course, I held back. In a kindly voice, I asked, "Why did you attempt suicide so suddenly?"

"It wasn't your fault or anything, Satou."

"I know that. So…"

"I've grown tired of living."

"Explain in more concrete terms."

"I got sick of everything. There was no reason for me to keep on living." She chanted these abstractions, a smile still on her face. Was she making a fool out of me, after all?

"Yeah, that's right. I don't think that I can get help from you any longer, Satou. You're just a hikikomori, in the end."

The blood rushed to my head. "Go ahead and die!"

"I *will* die."

"No! I was kidding. Don't die. If you die, you'll go to hell."

"You don't have to be in such a panic. To begin with, I'm basically already dead, seeing how I took all the drugs I'd saved over an entire year. If my uncle hadn't found me, I would have succeeded. No matter what you do, Satou, I'm determined to go ahead and die."

There, in the winter, standing at a cape in the inky darkness, we continued discussing whether to live or die. The conversation was light years removed from the normal, everyday world.

It was already past midnight, and it was freezing. Misaki's teeth chattered.

"Either way, I'm going to die." She had grown defiant. "Go ahead and try to stop me if you want, even though it's impossible."

Clearly, the views on suicide traditionally retained by our society no longer held any merit. Without any shame at all, she was arguing for death.

I rebutted, "If you're saying stuff like that, Misaki, then you don't really feel like dying anymore, do you?"

In response, Misaki put her hand into her coat pocket and pulled out a metal object.

"I have a box cutter here." The blade slid out of the handle. She declared, "Right now, I'll cut my wrists with this box cutter!"

"That's dangerous!" I tried to grab Misaki's hand.

"Don't come near me!" Misaki quickly jumped up from the bench to avoid my grasp.

"I don't know what to do. I'm sure that I've gone crazy. If you come too dose, I'll probably cut you!" As she shouted this, Misaki stretched out her right hand, which gripped the box cutter, and put her left hand behind her back. She looked like she was attempting some fencing pose.

"What are you doing?"

"I learned it from a book called *The Art of Murder* that I read at the library. I'm employing the knife-fighting art of the Sicilian Mafia."

Putting several feet between us, Misaki swung around the box

cutter, threatening me.

"Aren't you disgusted? Disgusted because the person you came all this way to save really is crazy? There's nothing I can do about that, though, Satou. I'm sure you were thinking something along those lines, right? Like, you wanted to show how cool you are by saving some crazy girl about to commit suicide. That's what you were thinking, wasn't it? But it's impossible. It's impossible!"

With the moon at her back, it was hard to see her, so I couldn't tell what expression she wore. Though it sounded like a farce, it wasn't. That much seemed certain. I asked her seriously, "If I told you I'm deeply in love with you, what would you do?"

"I wouldn't do anything. I'm finished. I mean, you're just a hikikomori to begin with, Satou. And you look like you'd change your mind quickly. Besides, in actuality, you don't like me at all, right? If someone won't be mine from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, it's better for me to die. It's not like my desires can be granted by just anyone. I always knew this. And that's why, either way, I just need to die."

"I like you! I love you! Please, don't die!"

"Ha ha ha. You're so funny, Satou. But it's no use. I'm going to die!"

Our dialogue was somehow very much like a shoujo manga.

Still, I knew that words like "love" and "hate" probably weren't that important. The problem likely lay in a deeper, more fundamental place. I thought that I should try my best to explain this to her. I should somehow put it into words for Misaki. However, the words would slip away at once. The second I pronounced them, they would lose all meaning.

I just didn't understand. What should I do? What did I want to do? What was I thinking…? It didn't really matter if she died. That's what I thought.

It's all the same in the end. The only difference is whether death comes sooner or later. Even if I do keep living, there will be only more suffering and more hardship. There's no meaning to it. There's no meaning to life. It would be better to die. This was a thoroughly logical conclusion that no one could refute.

At least, I couldn't refute it. In fact, I doubted that anyone was less suited to the role of convincing someone else to give up on suicide than I was.

"It's not right." I kept saying these ridiculous things. "Don't say you're going to die."

All the words sounded artificial.

Deciding to rely on force, I stepped toward Misaki, who was still swinging the box cutter around. She backed up. Ignoring her wild movements, I lunged forward and reached out my right hand. Just before my hand touched Misaki's body, the blade of the box cutter sliced open my palm. A second later, blood began to flow. It soaked into the snow.

It hurt, but the pain was wonderful.

Misaki stared at the bloody box cutter, a dreamy expression on her face. I gave her a smile.

Misaki looked as though she were also about to smile.

The wind blew, and powdered snow danced upward.

Finally, I understood. I knew what I needed to do: I would keep this girl alive. I would save her.

How? Does a hikikomori like me have the power to do things for others? Wasn't that kind of thing impossible? Shouldn't I know my place? Well?

Yet somewhere, there had to be a wonderful solution. I truly believed this. There had to be a way for everything to work out. There had to be a way to fulfill Misaki's wishes and my own hopes. Surely, I already knew the answer.

I would erase her pain and make it possible for her to live on, laughing and happy. I would give her the vitality to make it until tomorrow, give her the strength to live. The method—I had to know it already, somehow.

Once, she'd said to me, "If that type of bad God did exist, then we could go on living in good health. If we could push the responsibility for our misery onto God, then we would have that much more peace of mind, wouldn't we?

"If I could believe in God, I could become happy. Even if God is a bad guy, I know I could become happy. The problem is… the problem is I have a poor imagination, so I can't believe in God very easily. Look, couldn't He create some really showy miracle for me, just like He does in the Bible?"

She wanted to believe in a God, but her God was a villain. He was the main instigator of all evil. If she could believe in the existence of someone so evil, Misaki had said that she could keep on living. If a miracle occurred in front of her, it would prove the existence of this villain. She had said that, in that case, she would be able to keep on living. *I'll grant your wish!*

The method was unfathomably difficult, terrible, and likely would require an enormous sacrifice. That, itself, however, was what I desired. To sacrifice myself to save the heroine would be the noblest act I could perform.

Ah, I wanted to brag to Yamazaki, *I'm living right now, this very moment, burning out my life in a wonderful manner. I truly feel alive.* I wanted to hold my head high with pride and brag to him.

It was true, looking at it objectively, that this was quite a dramatic night. A girl swinging a knife around and me trying to stop that girl from committing suicide. It was all rather moving. Given that fact, the words should come pouring forth. In this situation, I should be able to say something eloquent.

Misaki was trembling. I probably was trembling, too. I was frightened, so I tried to bolster my courage.

Memories from my twenty-two years passed through my mind. I realized that I had existed for this moment, when I would do whatever I could—anything I could—to keep this girl alive. It was probably my life's mission. If not, then there was no meaning… No meaning for my having lived up until now, no meaning in living and then dying. At that instant, I understood everything. I knew everything, and everything was connected.

I would help Misaki, who was shaking with terror. I would give my life to help her. This kind of situation must have been what I'd desired all along. The flags that guided me toward the ending all had unfurled.[37] My dialog, leading toward this ending, was all that remained to set this scene into motion. Because of that, I would stand up and face it. Misaki could find a reason to live. It would be a happy ending.

I was scared. *Please, help me…*

Even so, I gathered my courage and embraced the trembling Misaki. "It's not your fault, Misaki."

I hugged her with all my strength and whispered into her ear, "It's not your fault at all, Misaki. Not a single part is your fault."

She was slight, thin. Shaking, she clung to me, and the darkness surrounded the two of us.

The wind was strong that night. Snow fell lightly. The stillness grew deeper. Why were we so sad? Why were we so lonely? *Do you know the reason? Oh, I understand. It's because we're about to part, about to say farewell. That's why we're trembling. We're forever alone, and we're forever lonely. That's how it always is, the way it's supposed to be. Everyone is like this, so don't hate yourself. Don't hate yourself. There are other things you should hate. You need to know that.*

"That's right, there are bad people. There are people who've hurt you, Misaki."

There's no need for you to be sad. No need at all. Why must you be sad? If you always had to live in pain, lonely and suffering that would be irrational. It would be strange, wouldn't it? That's just nonsense. That's why there has to be someone, somewhere, behind all this. A villain who forces you to suffer.

That's why…

That's why, in this world, conspiracies exist.

However, there is a more than a ninety-nine percent chance that the plausible-sounding conspiracies that you hear about from others are simple delusions or even intentional lies. When you visit a bookstore, the books with rides like *The Great Jewish Conspiracy to Ruin the Japanese Economy!* or *The Super Conspiracy of the CIA That Hides Their Secret Pact*

with Aliens! are all just trivial delusions.

Even so…

Even so…

A tiny percentage of people actually have stumbled upon a real conspiracy. There is, in tact, one person who witnessed with his own eyes a conspiracy that exists, at this very moment, in the most extreme secrecy.

Who is this person?

It's me.

What was the enemy's name? I knew it. I had known it for a long time, the name of the evil organization that tortured us, the terrible God for which Misaki had earnestly wished. Its name was…

N.H.K.

That's right! I remembered everything now: the name of my enemy, my mission, the reason for my existence, the reason I had continued to live until now, and the reason I had spent every day empty and vapid. *Yes, my life has existed only to save you. This is probably true. It's all true, so listen to me!*

Still embracing Misaki so she couldn't pull away, I explained in brief detail. "Listen, Misaki. In this world, there is an evil organization. It's name is N.H.K. N.H.K. is a huge organization that spans the entire globe. They're an evil, secret society, and they're the ones who put us through this pain. It's all the N.H.K.'s fault. After this, if anything bad happens around you, it's all the N.H.K.'s doing. Everything is the N.H.K.'s fault!

"For starters, the name N.H.K. itself is simply a coincidence. The actual name doesn't matter at all. If you don't like 'N.H.K.,' you can call

it whatever you want. If you wish, you can even call it Satan. Or call it the evil God. It all means the same thing.

"It's true. The names don't matter at all. They're just a set of sounds. An imaginary enemy torturing you: That is the real essence of N.H.K. For example, take that girl from my high school literature club. To her, it could signify the 'Nihon Hiyowa Kyokai,'[38] as her own weakness continually defeated her. She was weak in both mind and spirit."

Please, stop trying to slash your wrists. Please, become happy, somehow.

I continued, "In the case of Misaki, N.H.K. means 'Nihon Hikan Kyokai.'[39] Because of the misfortunes you were born with, Misaki, you saw everything in a pessimistic way. *Please, forgive me for being alive. Don't hate me.* You always were self-defeating like that.

"Then, my own N.H.K.…

"Well it's actually the N.H.K.'s fault that I became a hikikomori, just as it's their fault that you suffer, Misaki. That's the truth. I learned this through a certain technique. I fought with them. I've been fighting them for a long time, but it's no use anymore. I've finally fallen victim to them, and they'll kill me before long. But Misaki, you're fine. You must live on, in health."

Misaki clearly was frightened as I kept spewing nonsense.

I released her and took a step back. Now, I would show her a miracle, a great miracle, in order to prove the N.H.K.'s existence. I would reveal my true nature as a strong soldier who battled the N.H.K., and I would defeat them for her.

If I did that, Misaki probably would believe my story. She would live on, smiling. She most likely would stop hating herself, and her pessimistic personality probably would be healed.

That was the answer. I would give her immutable love. *You were*

afraid. You were afraid of being hated by others. You were afraid that others' feelings might change. But you'll be okay. My feelings won't change. I love you, and that feeling absolutely will never change.

And the reason…?

"Ah! I can't go on! It's a psychic attack by the N.H.K.!"

I rolled around in the snow.

"Do I look like I'm going crazy? If so, then that, too, is caused by the N.H.K. I'll be killed soon! I'll be killed by the N.H.K.! But I'll return the blow! Just you watch!" I got up and ran, heading for the edge of the cliff.

I started out running slowly.

"Goodbye, Misaki! My legs are moving on their own. I'm going to be killed by the N.H.K. But in the moment that I die, I plan to do something to return their strike. I'll destroy them!"

My speed gradually was increasing.

"That's right! In order to defeat the N.H.K., I have to sacrifice my own life so that I can use my special attack. This is why I must go, but I'll protect you!"

I was moving at full speed now.

I had to run out into the night sky with all my strength. The cliff edge was nearing. *Ah, I'll jump. I'll dive. I'll use my special attack.*

Because of my unbelievably idiotic end, Misaki would have to believe in the evil organization. Due to my special attack, she might see the end of that evil organization. And it probably would bring her happiness.

And despite everything, Misaki would not need to feel guilty at all. This was all I had wanted. I always had intended to die.

I would fulfill my own life's purpose and also save Misaki. Truly, this was the clearest way to kill two birds with one stone. I was the one who had planned to die. I always, always had planned to die.

After all, I even had tried to starve myself to death. But that had proven to be impossible. A weak-willed person like myself couldn't carry through with something like a fast: My limit was four days. Then, I had worked to earn my living expenses. That was the single time I had worked hard before my death. I always had been searching for some way to die.

In short, I was a much crazier person than you. It proves that, emotionally, I am an abnormal person. I mean, if I weren't, then I couldn't do something like this, right? Misaki, while you look down on me, at the same time, please accept my love or whatever it is. I'll die soon, but Misaki, you must live-on. I will defeat the N.H.K. and get rid of dye evil organization. Please, believe this. If you do, you can stay alive. Misaki, you can keep living.

Watch my special attack and burn it into your mind. Look, can you see it? Can you see the Revolutionary Bomb, brightly shining in my right hand? It's the Revolutionary Bomb that Yamazaki refrained from using, an earth-shattering bomb that destroys villains. It's very, very weak, far too weak to blow away the N.H.K. But it's more than strong enough to snuff out this minuscule, pathetic, worthless living creature—in short, me. And if I die, my N.H.K. also will disappear, because the N.H.K. is God. It is the entire world. And with my death, my world will dissipate. And the N.H.K. will disappear. That's exactly why I need to do my special attack right now, with the legendary Revolutionary Bomb.

I was going to die. I was going to dive from the cliff soon. Behind me, Misaki was screaming something, bur her voice no longer reached me.

No one could stop me now.

This was the best! My body ran like the wind. Ah, I felt good. I felt invigorated, running as fast as I could, atop the cliffs, in the dark.

I also was scared. I didn't want to die.

There was no reason for me to live. I didn't want to live.

Soon, I would die. Only a few feet remained before the cliff's edge. In mere seconds, the space of one heartbeat, I would soar out into the wide-open sky.

After just a few more seconds, swinging my arms as hard as possible and sticking out my legs as far as I could, I would dive. For the first time, I could truly escape, leave my six-mat, one-room apartment and fly higher and higher into the open sky. I would jump and fly.

Ah, just a little longer. I'll fly soon.

I would jump into the Sea of Japan, as though I were doing a running long jump. I'd jump out…

I'm jumping…

I jumped.

I jumped!

Both my legs left the ground. My body was floating in the air, and after a few moments, my body would fall soon.

I would fall and smash into the Sea of Japan.

The ending was very near—just like in the erotic game that Yamazaki made, I would use my special arrack on the N.H.K. To protect the heroine, I would rush forward into the final battle. I had wished for that game scenario, and I was going to die exactly the way I had wanted. It was the greatest happy ending.

Soon, I will be saved. . . .

Then, it happened. Suddenly, something came to mind that concerned me. The ending of that game—no matter how I tried, I couldn't remember it. Did the hero of the game defeat the evil organization? In fact, was there even an ending at all?

Someone said, "There's no way to win."

It might have been a dream. I already might have lost consciousness some time ago. As I danced through nothingness, the pitch-black Sea of Japan and a bright, starry sky stretched out before my eyes.

And then, I saw them. They were mocking me.

My body would start falling soon. I would die. That had to happen.

But they said, "Remember."

On this bluff, where there had been too many incidents, construction to prevent them had already been completed. The Revolutionary Bomb disappeared without going off.

I screamed, "Is that how you do it?! You cowards!"

No answer came back to me.

Final Chapter

Welcome to the N.H.K.!

It became spring.

Of course, I was holed up in my room.

Why?! Why am I holed up?! Get hold of yourself! Do some honest work! I tried taking out my anger on myself in this way; of course, it's never so easy to escape from being a hikikomori.

I still suffered from the neuroses that attacked me, the desire to kill myself that would boil silently to the surface, and all the other sorts of problems I faced (my rent being raised or my favorite convenience store closing). On top of all that, I had my security guard job tomorrow. It was a complete pain in the ass.

I was depressingly worried.

Regardless, the cherry blossoms were in full bloom outside my window. New college students walked past the front of my apartment. I felt as though I had been abandoned by the whole world, as though I

were being mocked by the entire human race.

For example, Yamazaki had sent me a postcard recently. A photograph printed on the card showed Yamazaki, smiling widely, with a beautiful girl. He'd written, "Oh, I think I might be just about ready to get married. My parents have been bothering me for a while to get set up with someone. (In the countryside, we get married early.) And because I didn't really have a choice, I had a meeting arranged just once, and look! She's perfect!"

It seemed to have become an age in which even an erotic-game-loving lolicon could be blessed with happiness.

Die. Go to hell.

Next was the New Year's card sent by the female upperclassman: "Our house is a huge mansion. We're in love. I'm about to have a baby."

She really seemed happy.

Go to hell.

And on top of all that, Misaki's life, too, now was moving in a truly upward direction. When she had returned to her uncle's house, naturally, she had been severely scolded. She seemed to have sunk into a reflection about the incident that was deeper than the ocean. Eventually, at some point, she came to talk to me about it. "How do you think I could apologize properly?"

"Shouldn't it be enough for you just to live a healthy life?"

"I've caused more trouble than I can even completely understand, so that just won't cut it, okay? I need something to, you know, wholeheartedly demonstrate my gratitude and apologies."

"Your uncle is a rather wealthy man, isn't he? If so, then what about studying and going to college? Thinking back, didn't you pass your

college entrance exams?"

I just gave her some appropriate advice without thinking about it too deeply. Then, several months after that, my advice had become part of her reality. She was planning to begin college starting this spring. Of course, the school was obviously one that even I could have attended based on exam percentile, so it wasn't that much of a surprise, but…

Either way, that girl would be a college student while I remained a freeter and a hikikomori.

Ah, I can't take it. Go to hell, all of you!

They say that curses come home to roost. So, I forced my feelings back down and tried wishing for everyone's happiness, "Even if you fall into hell, keep trying, all of you."

I, too, planned on trying, little by little.

The reason for that was on a scrap of paper I had here.

It was a contract, made from a page ripped out of the secret notebook. To fulfill the contract, I had no choice but to try.

That night…

I had jumped, and then I'd landed abruptly. I had landed on top of the wire netting set up around the cliff to prevent accidents. The frame had been buried into the rocky cliff itself, making a hook shape. As expected for a sightseeing spot, they had gone out of their way to mount the fence in such a way that the beautiful view was left unspoiled. And as expected for a sightseeing spot, there was absolutely no fault to be found with the safety measures.

I wanted to cry.

I cried.

I wanted to die, but I couldn't die. If I could step out with only one foot, then this time, I could fly for sure. It was impossible. I couldn't do it. Both of my legs were shaking violently, and the sound of my heart beating was ridiculously loud. I felt terrible, I was nauseated, and I didn't want to be there anymore.

I was crying out for someone to do something. I was crying that I wanted to die. *Kill me right now*, I thought. I wished for someone to push me.

I didn't want to go home and shut myself up in my apartment, and I didn't want to see Misaki's face. I didn't want to think about anything confusing, and I didn't want to experience any more pain. I just wanted to die right then.

I scratched my head, curled up my body, and then I bent backward. It was humorous and pathetic. I looked like an idiot. Each time the wind blew, I dropped to all fours and clung to the fence. I was frightened. I was scared of falling. I got chills just from looking downward.

Below the netting was the Sea of Japan. The waves were rough. *Help me! No, don't help me. Don't laugh at me. What should I do? Don't screw around with me! Don't look! Don't look over here! Why are you crying? I'm the one who wants to cry.*

Misaki stuck her face out over the edge of the cliff and looked down at me.

I covered my face with both hands. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want any more disgrace in my life.

Stretching herself out over the cliff edge, Misaki held out her hand.

She was trying to save me. The look on her face said that she pitied me. Swiping away her outstretched hand, I put my leg on the rock wall and climbed up the cliff by myself. I slipped on frozen sections several times, landing on my ass in the netting each time. On my third try, I succeeded at climbing about seven feet up the cliff.

I collapsed on the edge. Misaki stood in front of me.

Grabbing my hand, she pulled me toward the highway as hard as she could. She was trying to get me away from the edge as quickly as possible, and I ended up dragged along the top of the snow.

When we arrived in front of the bench, where we had been sitting a few minutes earlier, she started hitting me. She hit me over and over. In the end, I also suffered a shoulder tackle. I rolled onto my back, and Misaki leaned over me. She buried her face in my chest, letting out sobs that weren't even words.

My right hand, which had been slashed by the box cutter, started to hurt. The bleeding wouldn't stop.

Misaki grasped my palm. I roughly pushed away her hand, and a bit of blood splashed onto her cheeks. She didn't even try to wipe it off. Sitting on top of me, she was crying. I tried to push her aside, but she wouldn't break her hold on me. She pushed down my shoulders and stayed like that for a long time, trembling. Still shaking, she raised her fists, punching my chest. She hit me over and over and over.

In the end, my face got beaten up, too.

She knew no limits. My consciousness was fading.

Raising her fist again, Misaki said, "You can't die."

I was silent, without any answer. So, she hit me in the face once more. "Please, don't die."

As I didn't want to be punched any more than this, I had no choice but to nod. So, I nodded and somehow managed to make myself smile. Next, I thought of telling her some kind of joke. But that was impossible.

Letting out a noise, I cried.

Misaki didn't look away from me. She just kept staring and staring.

Eventually, we returned to ourselves. At this rate, we were going to freeze to death, so we decided to put the cape behind us for the time being.

Life is painful and difficult. A lot of things really will get the best of you. It's actually rather hard.

Having made it back onto the road, I realized something terrible: How would we get back to the station?

"It took almost an hour by taxi, which means…"

"Yeah, if we walk to the station, it'll take until morning."

I felt a wave of despair.

Misaki pulled at me. "There's an abandoned home nearby, but…"

"An abandoned home?"

"My house."

After about a ten minute walk, we came to the abandoned house. The window panes were shattered, and a large hole had opened in the front door. We spent the whole night in a house that looked about ready to collapse. Surprisingly, though, I don't remember it being all that cold.

We talked and talked about all sorts of things in that house, where

there was a missing floorboard with every step. Misaki told me about her memories of that house. Most of them were tragic, but a few were kind of nice, too.

"My first rather… I don't even remember his face, but he named me. Because there's a beautiful cape nearby, he called me 'Misaki,' meaning 'cape.' It's been a rather appropriate name, don't you think?"

I laughed.

Eventually, I grew a little tired. After I had fallen into a few seconds of sleep, Misaki suddenly shook me lightly. "In the end, what's the N.H.K.?"

As it would be a long discussion, I didn't repeat my explanation. Misaki got out from under the coat she'd been using as a blanket, and she pulled her secret notebook from her bag.

"I thought of an N.H.K., too."

"Huh?"

"It's dark, so can you use your lighter? Oh! It's okay, I can read the letters, even in the darkness," she said quickly, as she started writing something in her secret notebook with a ballpoint pen.

"Um, okay, it's finished." She tore out the page and handed it to me.

The only light came from the moon shining in through the window. Lying face up, I forced my eyes into focus to read the contents of the paper.

Contract for Membership in the N.H.K. (Nihon Hitojichi Kokankai)[40]

The purpose of the Hitojichi Kokankai:

Members will exchange hostages with each other; you offer your lives to each other, as hostages. In other words, it means, "if you die, I die, too, dammit!" If we agree to this, then we will be unable to act, like nuclear powers, glaring at each other during a cold war. And even if we want to die, we will be unable to.

If the situation turns into, "I don't care, even if you die," then this group's system has failed. Let's make sure that it doesn't become that way!

President of the N.H.K., Misaki Nakahara

Name: _____ Member #: _____

"Look, sign it quickly."

I took the ballpoint pen from her. I was troubled by it for a while. In the end, nothing at all had been resolved. It wasn't as though anything had changed.

"Let's look forward in life"? Are you an idiot?! We have dreams, so we're okay? We don't have any kind of dreams!

I wondered if I would have to go on living every day, whispering to myself, *I can't take it anymore.*

Is that okay? What do you think?

I worried back and forth about this for a little bit; in the end, though, I just signed the contract.

Meanwhile, Misaki, shutting the contract back in her bag, grabbed my shoulders and pulled me close. Our eyes met at point-blank range.

And then, in a loud voice, she declared, "Welcome to the N.H.K.!"

Her overly enthusiastic expression struck a humorous chord. Fending off a fit of stifled laughter, I thought to myself, I *don't know how long this can continue, but I'll try as hard as I can.*

I made this small decision.

N.H.K. Member #1, Satou Tatsuhiro, had been born.

First Afterword

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the hikikomori phenomenon suddenly broke out wildly across Japan.

As a sharp-eyed man, I thought I'd jump on the tide of the times and earn a ton of money. I'll write a story about hikikomori and become famous! I'll become a best-selling author with my hikikomori story! I'll go to Hawaii using the royalties! I'll go to Waikiki!

My dreams stretched out endlessly. However, once I actually started trying to write the story, I soon regretted it. It was painful.

What happens when a real hikikomori writes a hikikomori story? Inevitably, you start having to use your own experiences in your creation. You start having to write about yourself.

Of course, stories are fiction, and no matter how much one of the characters I used looks like me, he is himself, and I am myself. Even if we speak the same way and live in the same apartment, we are still unconnected. We inhabit separate worlds.

Regardless, it was still painful. It was embarrassing. I felt as though I

were taking my own shame and revealing it to the whole world.

In the end, I got caught up in paranoid fantasies.

What if everyone is secretly laughing at me while I write this kind of story? I really thought this.

In truth, I still can't read this story objectively.

Each time I reread it, I start to have light hallucinations. I break into a cold sweat.

Each time I approach one of a few specific places in the plot, I start wanting to throw the computer out the window.

At other particular points, I start wanting to run away from home to live deep in secrecy in the mountains of India.

That was probably because the themes addressed in this story are not things of the past for me but currently active problems.

I can't look at it from afar, thinking, "How young I was then."

This is all a real problem.

For the time being, I went ahead and wrote the whole thing. I decided to write everything I could. And what came out of it was this story.

Reading back over it, my face turning red… well, how is it, really?

When I read it on days when I'm in a good mood, I think. Amazing! I'm a genius!

And on days when I'm depressed, I think, I suck to have written something like this! Die right now!

Even so, I think that what is probably true about it is simply: *I wrote everything I could possibly write.*

Well then, hello, everyone. My name is Tatsuhiko Takimoto. This is my Afterword, for my second book.

I owe a lot to many people this time around, too. Everyone who had something to do with this book and everyone who is reading it, thank you so very much.

I still will do my best after this. I will get pumped up and try hard.

Tatsuhiko Takimoto
December, 2001

Second Afterword

Several years have passed since I wrote, "I still will do my best after this." I have not done my best. Proof of that is in the fact that I haven't written a single new story. I've been reduced to a NEET,[41] living as a parasite on the royalties from this book.

This may be the result of trauma or something like that. Because of it, I developed a strange disease in my brain. Because of this disease, which causes everything to remind me of the trauma, it makes my brain cry out. It makes my brain cry out each time I try to write a story. My brain always is crying out—and because of that, I have become unable to write stories at all. Because of the terrible fear that I faced when I wrote this book, I no longer want to write stories and have become completely unable to write any. Oh, what a terrible tragedy! For a young and talented (at least, he thinks so) writer to have become incapacitated because he wrote this book!

You must read this now. A rare, dark mystique is hidden in this book, which holds the cursed origins I have explained above. It seems

that a comedy manga writer long ago went crazy and often would disappear, but there was likely a ghastly force contained within the work that destroyed him, mentally. Because there must be some similar force within this book, it is a book that I confidently can recommend to anyone. It can even help with home and office communication. This book is optimal as a graft onto discussions like, "Hey, do you know the N.H.K.?" and then, someone will say, "The Nihon Hikikomori Kyokai, right? It's really funny. But it made me cry a little, too."

It's embarrassing to mention something that's selling so well, but no one knows minor works. One could say that a book around this level is indeed the masterpiece that truly could help everyone's communication. There are jokes about all sorts of current events included, and it's extremely useful for helping young people think about the present times. It could even be said that if you read this book, you'll be able to understand the feelings of young people who live in our society today. Older people will be surprised, thinking, "Oh, really? Young people nowadays are like this?!" And those of the same age as the characters in the book will sympathize, thinking, "I understand! I understand! This sort of thing happens all the time!" and can enjoy reading it. At least, I think this book has as much value as its price. I promise that it would take first place in a ranking of "books that you won't lose anything by reading."

I feel not even the slightest pang of guilt over giving you the above sales pitch. That's the honest-to-God truth, although these are days when I can't hold onto any sort of conviction that God actually exists.

Let's get back on track. It's already spring. It's already warmed up. Birds come to the tree outside my window. In light of that natural cycle,

a deep belief that one day, all my daily troubles will be solved boils up inside my chest.

Identity… Love… Existence… Space… God… The time must come, someday, when we will be granted a final answer regarding these great mysteries. With that warm feeling buried in my heart, I keep living. Hoping that this feeling of gratitude will reach all of you who are reading this work, I now close my laptop.

Tatsuhiko Takimoto
April, 2005

Endnotes

1. One measure of Japanese room size uses the number of *tatami* (straw mats) needed to cover the floor.

2. Heated tables used in the winter for warmth, as most apartments do not have central heating.

3. New Year's celebrations often include *o-zouni*, a special soup of rice dumplings and vegetables. Although New Year should be happy, the narrator remains depressed.

4. The Japanese Ministry of Health defines *hikikomori* as individuals who refuse to leave their house and isolate themselves from society and family in a single room for a period exceeding six months; typically, it's a young person or a "nerd" who feels cut off from society.

5. Kyokushin (ultimate truth) karate is a full-contact style of martial arts, founded in 1964 by Masutatsu Ohyama (1923-1994), a Korean-born master reputed to have trained alone for years on Mt. Minoubu and Mt. Kiyosumi.

6. Tatsuhiko Shibusawa (1928—1987) was a scholar, novelist, and

essayist.

7. A classic Gainax anime based loosely on *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

8. Although *otaku* is an honorific of the word *take*, or *home*, it has an extremely negative meaning in Japan. It suggests an overzealous anime or video game fan who does nothing but stay at home and pursue his hobbies.

9. The more literal meaning of the Japanese proverb is "the name reveals the body," but its import is closer to the Latin proverb: *Nomen est omen*, meaning name is an omen (of that which is named).

10. Japanese Broadcast Association.

11. As is probably evident, Japanese Hikikomori Association.

12. Released in English as *Magical DoReMi*, it's a children's show about magical witch girls.

13. *Tower of Druaga* is an old NAMCO game for the NES.

14. The name of his apartment, apparently located in the Mita area.

15. Japanese expression for young people, not including students or housewives, who lack full-time employment or are underemployed.

16. Technical, gimmicky school for people who want anime/manga/game industry jobs. Pretty much anyone can get in.

17. A Japanese Order (decoration) established in 1937. The order has only one class and may be awarded for contributions to Japan's art, literature, or culture; recipients also receive a lifetime annuity.

18. John 3:20.

19. John 3:36.

20. Romans 6:23.

21. Holiday week in Japan, April 29-May 5.

22. The rainy season usually lasts from June to July in Japan.

23. Company that makes erotic fiction.

24. In Japanese, *erotic game* often is called *eroge*, which is why this he is plausible.

25. Gakken Mu is a group of people obsessed with the supernatural and strange, based around the magazine of the same name.

26. Ruri Hoshino is a character from *Martian Successor Nadesico.*

27. An energy drink.

28. Katsushika Hokusai, the legendary printmaker.

29. *Three-Day Tororo* is a dish of grated Japanese yam (tororo) that is eaten on the third day of the new year, hence its name.

30. *Ping pong* is the conventional Japanese onomatopoeia for both doorbells and game show success indicators.

31. 1274-1281 A.D.

32. *Tetsuhou* later became *teppou*, which means gun, rocket, etc.

33. At movie theaters in Japan, they often sell official pamphlets with information about the movie.

34. Used to put a family stamp/seal on documents. The Japanese use these seals more often than signatures.

35. Called *Dragon Warrior* in English, it's a very old Nintendo RPG game.

36. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces, established after World War II, are Japan's military branches.

37. In Japanese erotic games, you have to go to the right "flags," or key scenes, to get any specific ending.

38. The Japan Weakling Association.

39. The Japan Pessimist Association.

40. The Japan Hostage Exchange Club.

41. A more socially acceptable term for hikikomori that has sprung up in the past few years.

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